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BeyondBiz Editorials
has asked –

Nice, you found time for an interview. Once more, I am happy to get an insight in the creative industry for BeyondBiz – having the chance to speak with such an “old stager” (which you guys definitely are). When having a glance at the history of your enterprise, it doesn’t go without a notice that you got ball pen refills off the ground – means: you paved the way for the invention of ballpoint pens in Germany. Means also: you are comparable to a Thomas Edison ^[laughing] – and huh?! Surprisingly, this company is based in the heart of the Black Forest.

Lisa Münch interviewing:

- Schneider Schreibgeräte GmbH
- Christian Schneider (owner of business)
- Frank Groß (manager of private limited company)
- Patrick Wintermantel (technical director)
- Dr. Barbara Wisser (chemist, ink development)

Lisa
to Christian

May I ask you, how you perceive this great development of you tradition-rich family business? You must be insanely proud being a part of it, aren't you?

[Christian laughing] I can't compare myself to Thomas Edison from my point of view, but I am proud to be in the position of continuing the legacy of my family successfully. People of today's generation take ballpoint pens for granted, but indeed: during my grandfather's time, the ballpoint pen was a ground-breaking invention, there were only pens and pencils before. However, it wasn't clear I am going to overtake the family business from beginning. For sure, my parents put secretly their trust in it, but they never expected it. After my studies, I gained my first working experiences at Ebay in Berlin – a complete alternative program to the Black Forest [laughing]. I suddenly had a change of mind during a world trip in 2008, where I visited some of the business's international representatives. It was a very motivating travel, as I came into contact with our products in so many different countries in the world. It inspired me to overtake my father's business. This was exactly the point when I started to feel proud and the thoughts of running a company self-determined while developing it further and creating own ideas consolidated. Although digitalization and AI (artificial intelligence) issues are interesting to me, I find it exciting to optimize and market a haptic product globally – instead of a digital one.

Lisa
to Christian

the digitalization has a big influence. I can imagine, that the analog culture of writing has suffered of it, too. Needless to say, that improvement and keeping pace with the digital colorful world is more than ever important. What boosts your entrepreneurship really? Is it all about “keeping pace”, or what is your muse for something new?

For sure, the impact of the progressive digitalization is remarkable in our industry. Although our products are analog, writing, marking and sketching by hand has an absolute right to exist. For example: we know that people nowadays write less, but on the other hand more often. Our products are adjusted gradually on this user behavior e.g., a pen has to write immediately for a fast signature.

Moreover, trends like coloring books for adults, the creative organization of the everyday life by the means of bullet journaling or slow movement methods that seem therapeutical, are gaining in importance. Therefore, we are looking optimistically ahead. I personally get motivated by such changes, because they also give room for chances. I am convinced, that rates of growth in the paper, bureau and office section can be reached the next years when offering innovative product concepts and catching or setting consumer trends. It is confirmed by our successful sales trend of our last years. However, it is not enough just to keep pace with the spirit of times, also products and manufacturing processes need to be reflected, analyzed and optimized all the time. To give an example, we are reflecting our existing products in respect of sustainability and product quality on a regular basis. Moreover, we are constantly analyzing our product assortment in order to find out how it can be developed further – focusing our key competencies. To protect the environment and the endless resources, the search for resolutions and alternatives of plastic material is essential. In the last years we were able to set outstanding milestones in the usage of bio-based plastics and recycling material.

In addition, the expansion of our assortment into the hobby and creative sector was realized by constant optimizations and the extension of our main competencies. In doing so, we found a competent partner with the brand Molotow that helped us to get into these product fields and to launch our own product line for the hobby and creative market.

Keeping pace – that's easier said than done. To do so, you probably have a committee of specialists investigating constantly in technic and ink development while looking for trends and possibilities. One of those specialists is Patrick Wintermantel.

Lisa
to Patrick

Where do you get your ideas from and what is exciting, but also challenging in your job?

It is important to always know the latest news when speaking of market development and technical possibilities. Thanks to a great network and a steady exchange with our partner Molotow and our excellent Schneider team, it is possible to react fast and successful to trends and issues.

Our high vertical integration enables us to test alternatives for oil-based plastics. This means we can push its optimized production. Within this sector we already made pioneering work and with Sketcher we bring this to a new level. Besides the recycled plastic of the body, also the fiber tank is made of recycled material.

The excitement and the challenges go hand in hand. We found the insights exciting that Molotow shared with us. Due to their experiences and close cooperation with artists it is possible to us to understand the needs of this target group. The challenge is to transfer these requirements into an economical and sustainable product concept.

Together, we realized an innovative and unique product that is sustainable in its production made with the latest technical possibilities.



Lisa This is exactly where I want to hook in. This product development is truly interesting as it may decisively revolutionize the classical graphic marker (often used with the deonym 'Copic' marker). I am mainly speaking of innovative technology, sustainable product philosophy and an extremely exciting ink research that Dr. Barbara Wisser may explain to us in a detail later.

What is the technical special characteristic of this marker that may outshine "Copic"?

Patrick Our Sketcher is that diverse which makes it pretty difficult to compare it to other products existing in the marketplace. It starts with the design – we created a triangular-shaped body that fits perfectly into the hand when holding a marker. It is comfortable and even after a long time of usage, the hand is getting less tired. Furthermore, we used sustainable bulk materials for the production of the Sketcher. The entire marker consists of >92% recycled material. As a consequence, 79% CO₂ can be saved, compared to the usage of conventional plastic. The recycling amount as well as the saving of the CO₂ emissions were verified and certificated by independent institutes.

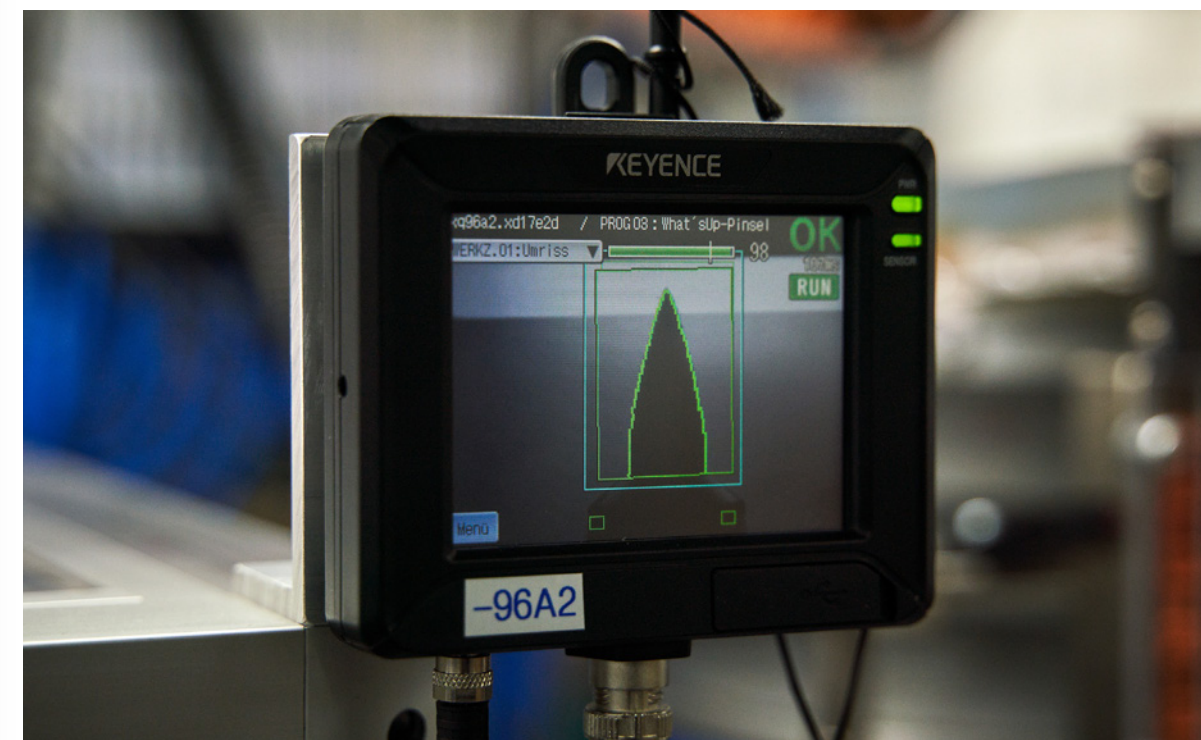
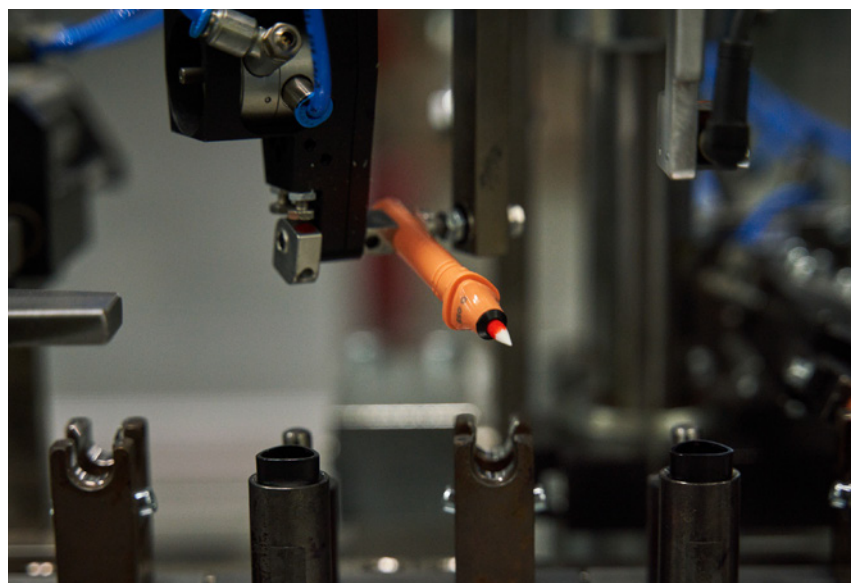
Also the colors can be bought separately – that saves plastic compared to buying a complete marker. Speaking in figures, this means ~56% or 10,6g. The cartridge system in general is an absolute innovation. As a result, the customer is not only able to "refill" the marker, but also to change the tip at the same time without getting dirty fingers. Another point is the fertility of the marker. Means: more ink comes out of the fiber tank. As two different cartridges are used, there are two different ink tanks made of fiber. The benefit is, that one tip does not "steal" the ink of the other tip. It leads to a higher fertility of the writing, sorry, painting tool.

A further point is the immense price advantage when buying a cartridge instead of a marker. For me, a massive highlight is the customizability. By the means of the different tip shapes and several color shades Sketcher provides nearly endless combination possibilities. That's a lot of stuff, huh? And we didn't spoke about the ink, yet.

Dr. Wisser The ink development was exciting and challenging, too. We thought about water-based inks from the bottom up. The requirements of artists and creative people are high – higher than for conventional writing tools. Brilliant, color-intensive inks that should be odorless and quick-drying at the same time are requested. You have to know that, compared to alcohol-based inks, water-based inks have a longer drying time by nature - due to their chemical composition. Thanks to some tricks we were able to avoid this circumstance. Our Aqua Pro ink dries almost es quickly as alcohol-based inks. Moreover, the ink application is pretty juicy and a really nice painting experience is created. Within our department, we called it "ink sweet-talker".

Furthermore, we could reach a good UV resistance for the inks. To give you an idea about the process: adjusting the ink, exposing the ink, proofing the result, as often as required – until the team from Molotow that has another perspective of the ink, and our team were satisfied.

And after some years of development, backstrokes and big successes we created a product that is unique in its characteristics. We achieved amazing things in our team.



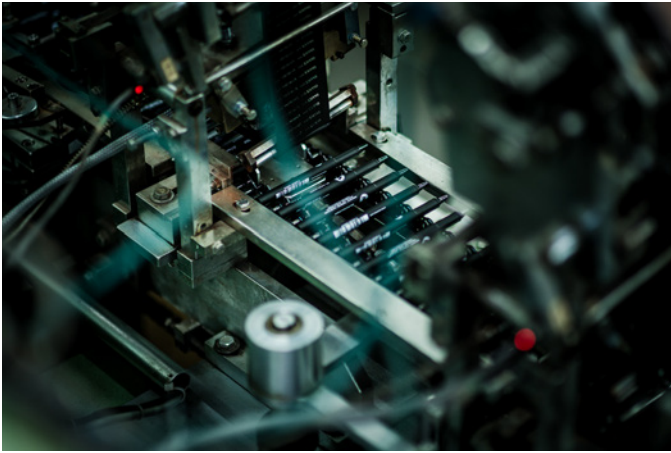
Lisa Wow, sounds like a good thing. Especially the aspect of sustainability is interesting to me. "Sustainability" is often used and meanwhile something like a "chewing gum" term chewed slummy-long until no taste and nothing else is left. However, this is not true for Schneider Schreibgeräte GmbH, as you are EMAS certificated. I've done my homework: obtaining and retaining this certificate is pretty hard, isn't it?

Frank You are absolutely right! The issue of sustainability is getting more and more important in our society and mutually the term "sustainability" is losing credibility due to an inflationary utilization. There is often the attempt to build up a sustainable image with pretended "green actions". However, I think that "Greenwashing" is getting exposed sooner or later which has a negative impact on the company's image. We started quiet early with resource saving and eco-friendly processes – at a time when many people smiled at it. Already in 1995, Schneider gave thoughts to environmental management systems. As the first company in our sector, we received the EMAS certificate in 1998 that we revalidated regularly since then. We have chosen EMAS, because we liked the idea of an ongoing improvement process inclusive a constant validation by an investigator, as well as the documentation of our environmental performance as part of the environmental statement of EMAS. In retrospect, this was a good decision that was worthwhile. It helped us to work out a well-founded basis e.g., the elicitation of data of the CO₂ footprint. However, the certification process is quite elaborately at the beginning and it needs a high amount of knowledge about environment-related processes in a company. A lot of figures have to be determined and documented while environmental goals and measurements have to be defined. Moreover, rules for processes and authorities must be created e.g., by method statements, trainings and the nomination of commissaries. Nevertheless, a lot of experience and knowledge is gained throughout the years, which has a positive impact on the time investment in the certification process.

Lisa Sounds like a lot of work. And as if this wasn't enough, you started a partnership with Molotow alongside – The urban brand for creative painting tools, markers and spray cans. How did this extraordinary cooperation happen? Where are the interfaces? What does this mean for the stationery market and the creative sector?

Frank Yes, sparks were flying when we first met [laughing]. For a long time, Schneider is monitoring the close-by art and creative branch. Due to the setup of our own ink production, we gained additional internal competencies that we can use versatily – also for the production of art supplies, for painting tools, markers and colorations. However, we had no knowledge about the consumers and no access to the market as well as no prominence in this market segment. Along came Molotow. After the first conversations, we recognized quickly that we fit together and complement each other. Our both companies are well known for innovations on the highest quality level and for the production "Made in Germany". Moreover, we have similar thoughts about sustainability. Straight away it was clear to us, that we can benefit from each other's knowledge in many ways. Molotow knows the creative market and the target group better than anyone else. They know about artist requirements. On the other hand, we have a big knowledge in manufacturing. It was aimed from beginning to achieve technology developments with unique selling propositions from the knowledge exchange of both companies in order to create writing and painting products that will amend the product lines of Schneider and Molotow.

In addition to it, we started with the takeover of the international distribution of the Fine Art assortment from Molotow that helped us to gain first experiences with the marketing of art supplies. Our international brand awareness and team, including the logistic was truly an added value for Molotow. Step by step we came closer to the hobby and creative market. A lot has happened since the cooperation in 2016. The mutually-developed Molotow Blackliner is a big success and meanwhile in 13 stroke widths available. In turn, Schneider benefits at its conception and marketing of its creative line “Makers Line” from the decades-long expertise of Molotow. The “Makers Line” is characterized by the innovative product lines as well as a completely new and unconventional communication style that fits to hobby and semiprofessional users. Our common development can be pursued with excitement – that’s for sure.



@lisamuench_editorials
Editor in chief at BeyondBiz