

sp portrait: Always the perfect customer service

Always the perfect customer service Outstanding quality and excellent service, together with a high degree of flexibility and reliability are the strong points of renowned Mannheim/Germany-based chocolate mass manufacturer Schokinag. Another forté is the company's highly efficient research and development division which allows for rapid innovations and adjustments.

By Dr Bernhard Reichenbach

A walk through the factory hall of chocolate maker Schokinag, past huge production plants and tanks for raw materials and the finished chocolate, can be an arduous effort, especially due to the cleanroom outfit comprising a plastic hood and coat, which must be put on for hygiene reasons. The waste heat of the chocolate manufacturing process, which comes from the hot chocolate and the huge pieces of equipment such as mixers, five-roll refiners and conches, can evoke tropical feelings.

The company with its 120-strong workforce ranks among Europe's key industrial chocolate makers, its machine park churning out a broad variety of liquid and solid chocolate on a large scale, in addition to chocolate components. More than half of the customers operate in the sweets industry, more than 25 % coming from the pastry and ice cream sector and the rest from the trade and crafts.

At present, Schokinag has an annual capacity ranging between 80,000 and 90,000 tonnes, which is to be expanded significantly as business is going well. Rolf Eiermann takes a look at the future: "We're poised to invest about ten million euros for this purpose in the coming three to five years." The chocolate specialist joined the tradition-steeped company in 1989 and was appointed managing director in 2009.

That same year, Schokinag was sold by the founding family and, following a few changes in ownership, was ultimately acquired in 2016 by Dutch investors Nimbus and Varova. "They're giving us plenty of rope", emphasises Rolf Eiermann, continuing that "we are now - once again - an autonomous, medium-sized business with short decision-making paths. And our customers are quite happy about that. The vigorous support afforded by the investors meant we were back on our own feet in no time. Establishing a pro-level procurement structure and finding new funding partners



Schokinag offers an ample product portfolio which is to be expanded even further. (Images: Schokinag/Reichenbach)



MD Rolf Eiermann places importance on top quality and optimized service.



A view of Schokinag's research laboratory.



100 % of the liquied chocolate is manufactured to individual, bespoke customer recipes.

are but a few examples."

Annual turnover, which is totally dependent on raw material prices, is in the low three-digit million range. It is based on dark chocolate (cocoa portion of up to 85 %), white chocolate, and milk chocolate, all mostly in liquid form. The solid products are sold in different sizes, a variety of shapes and forms, and come in diverse packaging, e. g. drops or chips for pastry products such as cookies.

Dark chocolate and milk chocolate account for 40 to 45 % each, and the white variety for around 15 %. "We're marketing our liquid chocolate all across Europe, and the solid chocolate, which is more straightforward to move around, the world over", explains Rolf Eiermann. "60 to 70 per cent of the solid and 100 per cent of the liquid chocolate is fabricated according to individual, bespoke customer formulations."

Investing in different ways of optimization

Keeping ways short, Schokinag sources the bulk of its cocoa-based raw materials from a cocoa-processing firm "just across the street", to which there is a good rapport. And there's a reason for this: the company, which has been absorbed by Olam, used to be a part of Schokinag. "That said, we also work with our own cocoa beans, especially when it comes to specific bean varieties or certified sustainable cocoa beans," adds Eiermann.

Most of the products from the factory are sold throughout the EU territory, with Germany and the neighbouring countries as the key markets. But, as Rolf Eiermann believes, there are opportunities for expansion, for instance into Eastern Europe, Great Britain and the United States, the Middle East, and other regions all over the world. "Mannheim, where we are headquartered, lies right in the middle of Europe. This puts us in a favourable position, geographically."

Customer satisfaction is critical to keeping sales figures high in the future, believes Eiermann. That's why Schokinag puts the x in top quality and optimised service, together with detailed consultation for surrounding its products. "This helps us stand apart from our larger competitors in the market, since it lets us respond more quickly and flexibly", stresses Eiermann, according to whom his company ranks fifth internationally, right behind major players such as Barry Callebaut and Cargill.



Mixing tanks for the finished chocolate.

Standing still means falling behind, as the Schokinag manager sees it. Therefore, the focus is put on expanding the existing product portfolio and on streamlining efficiency, flexibility, and reliability. This is to be made possible by investing € 3 to 5 m in the years ahead, because: "We want to be the number one supplier for our customers, as we deliver the best chocolate products and service at a fair price at all times."

Schokinag adjusts to customer needs, providing keen support in the field of product development and optimization. This is based on a strong research and development division that even boasts an in-house technical centre, whose principal job is to create new recipes for a broad range of customer applications.

"Our R&D division enables us to come up with new developments and adjustments very quickly, and to scale up to industrial levels. This factor is pivotal to success in the business-to-business segment", emphasises Rolf

Eiermann, hinting that a few interesting novelties are in the pipeline currently. That's all that can be said for now, but those interested in product innovations from

Schokinag can pay the company a visit at the Fi Europe trade show (hall 11.1, stand D 10), which is scheduled to take place in Frankfurt/Germany from 28 to 30 November. "This trade show is of critical importance to us, so we'll be setting up a rather large stand", says the managing director. •