

## FASTBOLT SCHRAUBENGROSSHANDELS GmbH



## Investing in excellence

**F**astbolt possesses, to the external observer, an uncanny knack of emerging from difficult trading cycles prepared and energised to drive the business forward. The reality is that it's no accident and is the product of intense effort, dedication and not a little inspiration. In his office in Fastbolt Germany, Heinz Storch readily acknowledges that 2001/2002 have probably been the toughest years the group has experienced in 21 years of trading. Not surprising then to find that the "fire" of tough market conditions has, once again, tempered a keen, new edge to a business that has already established its presence across many countries in Europe.

That presence emanates from

a pivotal decision made by Heinz Storch in the early 1990's, that to achieve major future growth Fastbolt had to be at the heart of the European fastener market. He recognised that could not be achieved from a UK business base alone and, in 1992, Fastbolt Schraubengrosshandels GmbH was founded in the rural German township of Gronau-Epe, a few kilometres from the Dutch border. The location proved excellent for an import-wholesaler with aspirations across the European market - established as a German trading company but within economic range of the major container ports.

Any insight to Fastbolt demands recognition of the array of business attributes

Heinz Storch embodies. Arguably one of the most crucial has been the ability to juxtapose an instinctive restlessness to drive the business forward with the realisation that every stride taken has to be securely founded. Two factors counterpoise an apparently limitless energy to initiate change. The first is his capability to incisively and dispassionately analyse the condition of his business and its place in the market. He possesses acute benchmarking skills and the adaptability to take on new ideas and technologies. The second is the ability to pick talented people at the right time - and draw on and respect, even if on occasions they run counter to his instincts, their skills and opinions. Not all those people are visible from outside the business. In the case of UK based Financial Director, Roy Crosby that is undoubtedly a matter of personal choice. Nevertheless for many years he has played a crucial role underpinning the group's financial security without eroding the dynamism of the business.

In 1996, when Fastbolt moved from rented space in Gronau to its current, custom-

built warehouse, Tony French, later Fastbolt Warehouse Director, played a similarly understated role in establishing the logistical base for the German business. By 1998 continued success in the German market meant that the warehouse had to be doubled to its current 4000 square metre, 8500 pallet location capacity. More recently Tony French was responsible for steering the operation to ISO 9001-2000 accreditation, receiving a rare accolade from the auditor who said he "had never seen better preparation." The current German operation stocks and handles around 4500 product lines, which with variations in finish, recess and packaging adds up to some 16000 sales items. Future expansion when required, though, is assured - Fastbolt have options on adjoining land that virtually doubles the existing Gronau site and Heinz Storch already envisages an improved design high-bay warehouse.

In the last two years Fastbolt has scrutinised its operations and market positioning, identified core tenets of the business, and made strategic investments in both equipment and people - all with the clear intent of maximising





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**Sales Director, Ekkehard Beermann launching the new catalogue at Practical World**



market opportunities in the next three to five years. The first principle of its market positioning has been reaffirmed - dedication to supplying distributors only. The objective says Heinz Storch is, "to be the number one European master distributor in our product fields." Currently that means seven product groups - Self Tapping Screws, Self Drilling Screws, Machine Screws, Tritap Thread forming screws for metal, Plasfast for plastics, Metric DIN 931/933 Metric high tensile and UNC/UNF high tensile.

At the recent Practical World 2003 Fastbolt launched a new catalogue defining the ranges held in both German and English warehouses. The completely revised product database, including EAN numbers, also identifies whether main stocks are held in Germany or the UK, and will be used to generate both

CD-ROM and web-based versions of the catalogue.

The project belongs to Fastbolt's European Sales Director, Ekkehard Beermann, who joined the business mid 2001 having trained and studied for his Business Diploma with manufacturer Altenloh, Brinck & Co and ridden the helter-skelter of e-commerce with Fastenerexchange.com. He has played a key role, alongside UK Sales Director Richard Blythe, in evaluating Fastbolt's business and formulating the company's marketing strategy.

Three other pillars, beyond the long-standing "distributors only" policy, are clearly identified as part of that strategy. Ekkehard Beermann defines them as "having the strength of the specialist, demonstrating commercial flexibility and developing excellence in logistics". Fastbolt has long been specialist in the

products it stocks, focusing on providing unparalleled commitment to breadth and depth of range.

This has meant carrying a comprehensive stock range including less popular "intermediate" sizes - for example, longer lengths and less popular diameters in DIN 931 and DIN 933. It also means offering self-tapping screws in an extraordinarily wide range of recesses and variations. "No other company," says Heinz Storch, "is capable of meeting the needs of individual country markets for tapping screws, whether it is recess, head shape or plating finish."

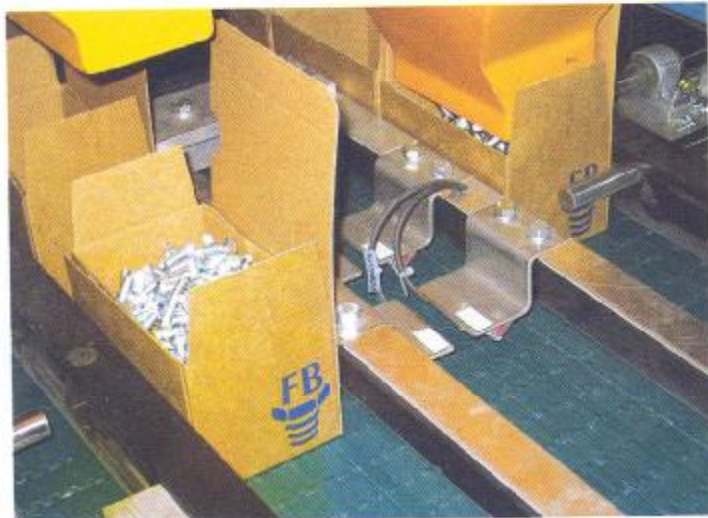
That competence has been extended further by the introduction of a fully automated packing line at Gronau. The equipment has the capability to assemble, fill, seal, label, shrink-wrap and palletise 10,000 boxes in a single shift and reflects a characteristic Fastbolt "no short measures" commitment to a project. Heinz Storch admits that the installation wasn't pain-free but after six months operation sees it as "an essential means to giving us more flexibility."

It allows screws to be imported in pallet case quantities, a by-product of which is simplified quality inspection. More importantly, it means that shelf availability across a range of pack options can be more efficiently sustained from a defined level of stock investment. "It also," says Heinz Storch, "means we

can ensure continuity in presentation to the customer whether it is in the new Fastbolt packaging or his own box choice." By securely shrink-wrapping inner boxes in a biodegradable plastic the packaging operation also provides benefits in reducing transport weight and meeting recycling requirements.

The ability to pack to customer requirements illustrates one aspect of the commercial flexibility to which Ekkehard Beermann refers. It means far more, though as he explains - "Fastbolt has the ability to develop individual relationships with its major customers wherever they are in Europe." As well as being specialists in product ranges, he argues, "Fastbolt has immense experience and expertise as an importer and master distributor."

We can take away the hassle for our customer and allow him to concentrate on his own specialisation - for example in servicing a major OEM production line." This is where Fastbolt, he says, has also to display 'Excellence in Logistics'. "It is the end customer who now dictates the standards and," he continues, "we have to support the distributor in meeting them." He argues that the world supply market is now virtually transparent. "In the past it was about finding a factory that other people hadn't found. Now it is about the way in which the relationship is managed with known suppliers. The important thing







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is the quality of the transactions, the reliability and smoothness of the relationship." Over 50% of Fastbolt business is now delivered outside Germany. "That means," says Beermann, "we must be able to translate logistics capabilities honed in the domestic market to someone in Portugal or Slovenia. We have to demonstrate the benefits of commercial flexibility, the depth and range of specialist stock and build the confidence that the customer's requirements will be delivered accurately, on time, every time so that he trusts us as his supply partner."

That necessitates complete integration and transparency within the business itself, which is the reason for, by far, the largest investment Fastbolt has made over the last two years - the introduction of SAP software technology in both German and UK companies. In hardware terms both companies operate from a central processor in Gronau linked by dedicated line to the Milton Keynes operation. For Ekkehard Beermann "SAP is the backbone of the whole operation", strengthened he says as, "more and more of our

customers also move to it." We needed," says Heinz Storch, "standard multilingual dependability to integrate the two companies and give us the tools to effectively manage our two key assets - the stocks here and in Milton Keynes."

He does not disguise that adapting to the SAP system took time and was, on occasions, particularly painful but he is clear it was an essential prerequisite to driving the business forward. Internal and external sales forces both have access to the system explains Ekkehard Beermann, "which means they have the tools and the confidence to commit to customers - and both customer and sales guy know it will happen." The direct benefits to the customer are, he says, "quicker response, access to UK stock and vice-versa, and the delivery of an improved service level."

The SAP system also means that stock management can be progressively centralising in Germany, under the responsibility of Jurgen Klein - who, if your German is any good, belies his name by easily half a metre. He is a 30-year-old business graduate who brought to Fastbolt the experience of two SAP

implementations while working for BP Amoco. His fastener training has come courtesy of Heinz Storch and the development of a close working relationship with UK Managing Director Graham Joyce, who continues to hold responsibility for actual supplier negotiations. Now Jurgen Klein is beginning to work to develop a fuller awareness of the customer relationships and contracts in the UK, as well as Germany.

He already manages the "small screw" ranges for both operations and is planning for Metric and Unified High Tensile to follow soon. The control of the supply line from factory, through Fastbolt to the distributor will shortly be integrated further by the introduction of EAN13 bar coding.

So after 21 years doesn't Heinz Storch dream of a Sunseeker yacht on the Mediterranean? "Why would I want something like that?" he ripostes. He does say that he is no longer really involved in the day-to-day running of the business and clearly has immense confidence, and pride, in both German and UK teams. He has diverted some of that energy to the

development of the European Fastener Distributors Association. Nevertheless it would be a pretty unwise bet he didn't know today's sales to within a few Euros - or that he hadn't spent at least a few minutes contemplating new ways to drive this remarkable business forward. Few enough customers or suppliers are likely to complain at that - although a good number of competitors may well have a different view.

