

30 years of supply solutions for distributors

At the beginning of July, Fastbolt brought together team members from Germany, UK and China to mark its thirtieth anniversary. Four years after his untimely death it was inevitable the event would be tinged by the regret Heinz Storch was not there to share in the celebrations of a remarkable success story and witness another significant phase in the development of the company he founded in 1982.

Appropriately, having served 23 years as a director of Fastbolt, it was UK managing director Graham Joyce that told Fastbolt team members: "Thirty years ago Heinz would never have believed we could be here today." Maybe not but he melded vision and ambition with no small measure of self-belief and entrepreneurship, to stretch everyone in his business and ensure it was continually driven forward. As Graham Joyce put it: "Heinz was an absolute pioneer. It wasn't always easy with him, but it was always interesting. His foresight ensured investment in the best

Fastbolt began trading from a small rented warehouse in Milton Keynes. From its inception the company focused exclusively on servicing fastener distributors, a principle that has been rigorously maintained ever since. To establish suppliers in the UK fastener industry, responding to this dynamic incomer was a real challenge. An executive member of the UK fastener distribution association at the time later acknowledged the dilemma: "In the end we decided it was better to have Fastbolt in the association where we could keep an eye on Heinz." It is a tribute to the personality and

integrity of Heinz Storch that within a decade not only was his business firmly established in the UK market but also he was elected chairman of the association, shaking it from stagnation and steering it towards the positive role it now plays in the UK industry.

For that matter the market. For good or ill the fax for the first time allowed distributors to place simultaneous enquires with multiple suppliers and receive quotations within the day. In a geographically small and infrastructure intense country, next day delivery was already available and rapidly became the norm, fundamentally and irrevocably altering the service model of the fastener industry.

The fax was also crucial to Fastbolt's importing activities. Infinitely more important, however, was Heinz Storch's instinct for building long standing personal and commercial relationships with suppliers. He was one of the first European fastener businessmen to travel throughout Asia in search of reliable factories, a role that Graham Joyce took on and unquestionably developed. He will be uncomfortable at the comment but as well as forging a unique relationship with Heinz, Graham demonstrated extraordinary commitment in travelling for weeks in Asia to develop lasting relationships with manufacturers, many of which remain core to the Fastbolt business. Recruited very deliberately from a highly structured automotive purchasing background to take on the pivotal role of purchasing director, Graham injected new levels of professionalism into Fastbolt's sourcing, laying the foundations for its growth both in the UK and later Europe.

Electronic inventory control and sales systems took a little longer than the fax. During the Eighties Fastbolt relied on thousands of Kardex records and the famous 'red book', featured on the cover of this magazine, was the daily barometer of sales. In the early Nineties Heinz Storch sought out the best available ERP system on which to take his business forward. The transition was direct from manual records to a near paperless sales enquiry and entry system. As always the biggest challenge was for people to adapt to a radical change in processes. Some did not; others blossomed and grew to become key members of the Fastbolt UK team. Heinz Storch believed in picking the right people, but that was never to be an unerring

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logistics and operations we could have at the time. That tradition continues today."

Dennis Silverton, the independent accountant who supported Heinz Storch and, then business partner, Bernard Myers in forming Fastbolt claims the privilege of being not so much at the birth of the business as its conception. He highlighted another crucial characteristic. "Heinz and Bernard were straight, very honourable people. They believed business should always be conducted in the proper way." He added: "Heinz was always keen to have the best equipment and the best people."

Keynes in 1990. Today it still represents Fastbolt's professionalism and modernity – then it was a quite extraordinary statement to a still, in many ways, hidebound market.

Internally, though, it took some years for the technology to advance. In common with all its competitors during the Eighties the phone was the principle contact with customers and the telex with suppliers elsewhere in the world. Graham Joyce recalls the day Fastbolt installed its first fax machine at the end of the Eighties: "We had no concept of how this single piece of technology would change our business."



Recent office extension at Fastbolt headquarters

process. On reflection his real skill was in investing trust and responsibility in those people, challenging and supporting them to develop and refine their capabilities.

In 1992 Heinz Storch's ambitions turned to mainland Europe. Moving to Germany, he established Fastbolt Schraubengroßhandels GmbH in Gronau. Initially again, space was rented from Nellen & Quack, the Gronau freight company that continues to play a major role in Fastbolt's mainland Europe logistics. A novel agreement effectively provided Fastbolt with a warehouse with elastic walls allowing it to take on additional space as and only when required. By 1995 Heinz Storch had carved a new role for Fastbolt in the central European fastener market. Fastbolt moved into its current facility in Gronau Epe, within three years expanding it to respond to the company's growth needs. A further expansion in 2003 extended the warehouse and introduced a high capacity packing and palletising plant, and another extension was completed in 2010. Most recently an office extension accommodates an entirely new quality laboratory on the ground floor adjacent to 'Goods In' as well as providing additional office space overhead. That the site continues to have space for further expansion of its warehouse - the blueprints already exist for a high bay fully automatic extension - is testament, once again, to the vision and ambition of Heinz Storch.

In 2000 Fastbolt took the massive step for a company of its size of installing SAP computer systems in both UK and German operations. For Heinz Storch it was about having incontrovertibly the best platform on which to continue to grow his business. Inevitably the transition was challenging - participants at the time probably have another description - and a serious test of the character and capability of the people

in both businesses. Just as important as taking on the best system was the formative process for key personnel in the business.

Key to the continuity of the Fastbolt business, to an extent that Heinz Storch could never have envisaged, was the recruitment of Ekkehard Beermann, eleven years ago. A structured business education had been complemented with extensive work experience in a major German fastener manufacturer and a foray into the world of online systems and trading. More important, though, in a still young manager was a familiar combination of personal presence, commitment and self-belief. Within a year, it was clear that the chemistry was right and Ekkehard Beermann progressively took on the role of driving the business forward on the firmly established principles that had brought it successfully into the new millennium. The SAP system provided the platform for the introduction of FB Online, which radically advanced the communication relationship with Fastbolt customers alongside the further development of more customised links such as EDI.

In 2005 Fastbolt Trading (Shanghai) Co Ltd was established, followed two years later by the setting up of FQC, the Fastener Quality Center in Shanghai. The clear intent of both developments was to substantially systemise and professionalise Fastbolt's sourcing relationships in China to deliver new levels of assured quality to its European customers. Despite the advent of EU anti-dumping measures, the development of these businesses fundamentally contributed to the direct container solutions Fastbolt offers to its customers, both on products from China unaffected by trade defence measures, and on those from other parts of Asia. As an ISO 17025:2005 accredited facility, FQC is superbly equipped to carry out pre-

shipment inspections on product for Fastbolt's own inventory and for its customers as well as carrying out factory audits. For Eric Ni, Fastbolt's director in China the changes in European pattern of trade undoubtedly presented a challenge; one that with characteristic positivity he has embraced in developing business opportunities within China and in world markets outside the EU.

The Gronau celebration reflects a business that has dramatically developed in its thirty years of existence, during a period when businesses generally and the fastener industry specifically has seen unprecedented levels of change. It has made the transition from a small UK business to an international group with its management and purchasing headquarters in Germany.

The latest development has been the installation of new specialist software, interfacing with the core SAP system to provide major new efficiencies in Fastbolt Germany's warehouse management. It reflects a change in emphasis over the thirty years from a pioneering process of searching out new Asian suppliers to a continuous refinement of the effectiveness, reliability and flexibility of the supply chain between factory and final customer.

And yet... on a lake not far from Gronau there was an equally potent symbol that this is a business of utterly committed people of all kinds, shapes and sizes, from Europe and Asia, striving together to a common purpose. For one day that resulted in the exhilaration of propelling a dragonboat across the water... on any working day it is the satisfaction of delivering an exceptional level of performance and customer service. Some things really have not changed that much - which for Fastbolt customers is unquestionably for the best.

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