

# Fastbolt at 40

This year Fastbolt celebrates its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a fastener wholesaler solely focused on the distribution and reseller market. Content Director Will Lowry spoke to Fastbolt's Managing Director Ekkehard Beermann about the growth of the business and how its philosophy has enabled the company to develop into a key player within the distribution sector.

**F**ounded in 1982 by Heinz Storch, the cornerstone of Fastbolt has always been its commitment to the distribution and reseller market. "This policy has put us in a strong position and is a positive reason for distributors to buy from us as a strategic vendor – as they know we are not interested in competing with them in selling to industrial end users," explains Ekkehard. "The policy has given us a reputation in Europe that allows us to sell to any size of distributor in every regional market, as they appreciate that loyalty to the reseller."

Fastbolt originally started in the UK, before Heinz Storch set-up a German branch in Gronau-Epe in 1992, which ended up becoming Fastbolt's headquarters and main warehouse in 2005. This was followed by Fastbolt Trading based in Shanghai, China, also set-up in 2005, which focuses on supporting the European purchasing activities in the Far East, particularly in China, and also sells direct containers to distributors in Europe. Then there is FQC Shanghai, established in 2007, which provides quality inspection for products prior to shipment. The final addition to the Fastbolt Group was its Portuguese warehouse in Albergaria-a-Velha, which was founded in 2013.

"The company started in the UK, but it soon became clear that we needed a logistical and commercial presence in mainland Europe to successfully serve the market. Each market has its own characteristics and the structure in the UK, for example, is totally different compared to Germany, France, or the

Netherlands, which is why we thought it was important to also add the FB Iberica branch warehouse," mentions Ekkehard. "Having three warehouses in key locations is a big advantage as it enables us to provide smaller shipments on a permanent basis to our customers. We have found that smaller resellers don't necessarily keep that much stock, so they rely on us for quick delivery to their warehouse."

## Growing product range

As Fastbolt has developed so has its product range, with stock items standing just below the 10,000 mark. "Back in 2010 we started to strategically expand our range, by adding a lot of new product families, such as nuts, washers, threaded rod, etc, which was not in the initial range," highlights Ekkehard. "Fastbolt historically was known for its hexagon bolting and small screw ranges – self-tapping, self-drilling, machine screws, thread forming screws, etc. However, over the years we have looked to develop some new families and we are always looking at how we can further develop our offering to customers."

A prime example is Fastbolt's range of nuts, which it decided to expand recently. "As standard practice we stay in close contact with our customers, so we can work closely with them, but also to understand where they have extra demand that might be interesting to us. We then do a feasibility study to see if we are able to do this type of product and whether it fits into our range and our business principle," explains Ekkehard. "With our nuts range it was a case of doing a lot of research and analysis to see if there was an opportunity. Once we decided there was one, we expanded our nut range significantly so that we will now soon have

several hundred new items in a range of grades."

However, Ekkehard is keen to point out that Fastbolt has no intention of becoming a full range stockholder. "Our principal has always been the same – to import a sophisticated and defined product range from global markets. That is why we carry out our feasibility studies and also why we try to find maximum overlap in the markets we serve. This means that even if a product group is mainly stocked in the German central warehouse, we can still make it available for the UK and Portuguese sales teams. This process has been very successful for us and we have further plans to develop our range in the future – especially when it comes to more additions on the screw side."

## Quality as crucial as ever

Even with all the additions to the product range, one factor that is as crucial today as it ever has been is product quality. "As a business we have always ensured that we focus on the quality of our products," states Ekkehard. "We are selling our products to resellers across Europe and they are then selling it to a variety of industries. We know that we can only be a strong supply partner for those distributors if we can make sure the quality of products is consistent and high. That is why a change in suppliers is always a last resort for us, because we try to create long-lasting relationships with suppliers, not only for good communication and smooth logistics, but also for consistent and reliable quality of the product."

Ekkehard adds: "It is also the reason we set up our Fastener Quality Centre in Shanghai – as a 50/50 joint venture with another distribution company. The FQC



gives us the opportunity to also carry out pre-shipment inspection of products before they leave for Europe. This helps guarantee that the products we are shipping meet all of the necessary quality standards.”

### Strong online presence

Another area that Fastbolt has developed over recent years, to become a significant part of its business, is its FBoonline platform, which gained even further interest during the pandemic – when customers were looking for access to information quickly.

“FBoonline certainly saw an increase in users during the pandemic, as there was a lot of demand in the market for quick ‘real time’ information”, mentions Ekkehard. “With FBoonline, customers can see stock we have; when stock is coming in; when they can place an order; and at what price and what volume. Customers can even negotiate with the system online in ‘real time’ for bigger line items. It has grown over the years into a true business portal for our customers – covering all commercial aspects of their business with us.”

Ekkehard continues: “Thanks to our own programmers we have been able to keep developing the features to enable distributors to buy smarter, as well as use new services – such as FBconference, our built-in video conferencing system, which we introduced at the start of the pandemic and was used a lot by us to stay in contact with our customers.”

### Future-proofing logistics

Alongside the development of its product range and online capabilities, Fastbolt has also looked to advance its logistics capabilities. “Currently we are facing two big questions when it comes to our logistics,” points out Ekkehard. “The first is regarding the employment market and the lack of people available, which we do not see improving in the future. With that in mind, we asked ourselves what the future of material handling at our warehouse in Germany will be – knowing the growth that we have planned for the next few years cannot be handled with just hiring more people, as we will face issues with getting them. We therefore decided to start a project to see how we could improve the efficiency of our internal logistics in a way that we could handle more volume, more incoming goods, more order lines, more picking lines,



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more packing volume, but with the same sized team.”

Ekkehard continues: “The second question is what we can do now to plan for further challenges, such as those we have all faced in the industry over the last few years. The answer, we believe, is to increase our stockholding overall – so that we are less vulnerable to such issues. The basis of our business is the stock we keep, so ensuring that we can continue to deliver to customers is a fundamental issue – which is why we are planning an extension at our German warehouse in the future.”

The current market situation means it might not necessarily be the best time to be looking at building an extension – with costs exploding and contractor capacity already taken – but Ekkehard is adamant that at some stage Fastbolt needs to start the process in order to prepare for the next steps in the company’s future business development.

“It is very possible that if it was not for the Covid-19 pandemic that we would have already started with this extension plan. The

last two years have been almost unbelievable in how many huge issues that have arisen. Firstly, there was BREXIT, which seems to have almost been forgotten, then there was the pandemic, raw material shortages, sea freight issues and now the Russian war in the Ukraine (to read Ekkehard’s thoughts on all these topics go to pages 82 – 83 as part of the Fastener Distribution feature). This has created a very foggy outlook for the future. However, what we do know is that we will need more stock to maintain the business we have and we need to be more efficient with our intra-logistics to enable us to achieve the growth we have planned. Even if the market is standing still, we will still plan growth for our company by expanding our range wisely. The key is our motivation to keep moving forward and use creativity and passion to further develop our business in the future.”

### 40 and onwards

Whilst Fastbolt will be having some internal events for its staff to celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it will not be holding anything for external visitors. “Unfortunately, we still think it is probably a little too early to hold an event for external visitors due to rules and lockdowns still in place in some countries. Instead, we will have a number of communications with customers and promotions to mark the occasion,” reports Ekkehard. “We are very proud to reach our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and see it as a very important milestone. However, as a business we are focused on looking forward and through the investments in new product lines, and development of our intra-logistics capabilities, we are confident we will be able to continue to grow and develop as a business and support our distributor customers going forward.” +

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