

Leading the Pack

AHT Cooling Systems has been innovating and transforming the industrial cooling and freezing space for more than three decades.

Images courtesy of AHT Cooling Systems

With more than 30 years of experience under its belt, AHT Cooling Systems has an impressive record of innovation and a portfolio of leading-edge products to its name. In the field of industrial cooling and freezing, AHT Cooling Systems is renowned for its cutting-edge cooling systems.

AHT is a world leader in plug-in coolers and freezers for the commercial sector. The innovative plug-in refrigeration system was designed and developed by the AHT team and it has been one of the cornerstones of the company's success.

Hans Joergensen, CEO of AHT Cooling Systems, has been leading the company since 2000 and has seen it grow substantially. In 2000, the company had a turnover of €78 million; today it boasts one of €360 million. In addition to its

headquarters, which includes a production area that stretches over 60,000 square metres and produces more than 400,000 units each year, AHT has 12 worldwide subsidiaries as well as a partner network called COOLPOINT, covering more than 100 countries worldwide, and two additional factories, one in China and one in Brazil to serve the local markets in these areas.

AHT's leading systems are delivered to all major global discounters and supermarket chains as well as a number of renowned producers in the ice-cream and drinks industry via successful partnerships. Over the past 14 years with AHT, Hans has focused on developing and delivering the best systems and products to these global players. Hans believes that the company's ceaseless pursuit of innovation has allowed it to continuously push the envelope for the benefit of its customers.

The importance of innovation has been something that Hans has believed in throughout his career, which he says first started in his home country of Denmark. "I worked for a Danish company called Dyrup, which has many brands under its organisation. After that, I came to Austria and I was CEO of the Dyrup brands in Austria, Switzerland, and Italy from 1982 to 1990.

"From 1990 to 2000, I was the CEO of a company which was 50-per-cent owned by Linde Refrigeration in Germany and 50-per-cent owned by a Danish refrigeration company. In the year 2000, I came to AHT Cooling Systems and I've been here since then."

During that period, Hans has worked hard to develop and nurture AHT's products and operations, taking the business from 185 people to more than >



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1,400 employees worldwide. In its Austrian headquarters, AHT employs a staggering 1,100 people, all living and working around the local town. Impressively, up to three generations of workers are employed across the headquarters' departments.

In the 2000s, Hans and his team decided to focus only on their new plug-in system, which revolutionised the refrigeration sector. Before the plug-in system, most commercial refrigeration utilised the remote system, which is more expensive and harder to install and maintain. In comparison, the plug-in system located the compressor inside the chiller unit, making it easier and cheaper to install and maintain.

Hans says, "We were the first one to make the new plug-in system. Instead of the remote system in the supermarket, we have introduced a totally new system and this is the reason why we've had so much success, and it's

continuing to grow. When we first started we had our plug-in supermarket cabinets on the floor but now we've got the plug-in and ready-to-use vertical multideck refrigeration, which is also growing enormously."

With AHT focusing on the new plug-in system, the company sold the German factory where it produced its remote chillers and dedicated all its production and research and development energy to the plug-in chiller systems. As a result of this focus, AHT is now globally recognised as the leader in this field, designing and developing cutting-edge, innovative plug-in systems.

With an overarching philosophy based on the pillars of sustainability, energy efficiency, innovation, and maximum customer benefit, AHT is setting industry standards and leading the way for innovation. While many companies may struggle with innovation, Hans says they have a simple strategy.

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"It's very easy because all we've got to do is listen to our customers. Through listening to our customers, we know what they want and that we are developing the right products. We have a very big research and development department with more than 80 people and we are using roughly 4.5 per cent of our turnover for the development of new products."

This has seen AHT develop into the biggest innovation player in its industry worldwide, with the company boasting products that are two to three years ahead of the competition. AHT is outspending its competitors, with the organisation spending €4-6 million on the development of a new product. Incredibly, AHT has a failure rate of only 0.5 per cent, in an industry where the standard level of failure rate is three to four per cent.

The global awareness of AHT is in a class of its own. All main supermarket and discount chains



rely on AHT's plug-in freezing system. Also in the ice-cream chest freezer segment, AHT serves the market as a leading manufacturer and is a key supplier of well-known global ice-cream manufacturers.

A recent innovation which has really differentiated AHT from its competitors is its new multideck chiller system, which combines the remote and plug-in chiller systems into one. With no other company doing this, AHT has a distinct competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Energy efficiency and environmental responsibility are significant factors in AHT's dedication to innovation and improvement. Since 2006, the company has seen a 50-per-cent improvement in energy efficiency across their chiller systems. Additionally, AHT is spreading this environmental focus across its supply chain.

Hans says he and his team are dedicated to reducing carbon emissions across the entire AHT company structure and reinforcing the importance of environmental sustainability. "It plays a very big role for us because we were the first refrigeration company in the world to introduce totally CFC-free cabinets in commercial businesses. That was for Unilever in Australia for the 2000 Olympic Games."

It's a clear trend that AHT has always been at the forefront of the industry. With the company seeing numerous changes in ownership since 2000, Hans and his team have always understood the need



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to be agile and flexible, both internally and externally. Hans says the changes in ownership have been a positive thing for AHT.

"I wanted at that time to leave the stock exchange. When I came to AHT in 2000, we were still on the stock exchange and we were too small to be on the Austrian stock exchange. I decided to look for a new owner. I have nothing against private equity when companies are running well, so I saw some possibilities with private equity. They understood our idea, so in 2002 the company was taken off the stock exchange and sold to a private-equity firm.

"Private-equity companies usually keep you for five years and sell you when you have fulfilled your five-year business plan. In our case,

we had already fulfilled the business plan two years later so in 2004 they sold us to another private-equity company and the same thing happened again. Within 24 months, we had fulfilled another five-year plan and we were sold again at the end of 2006.

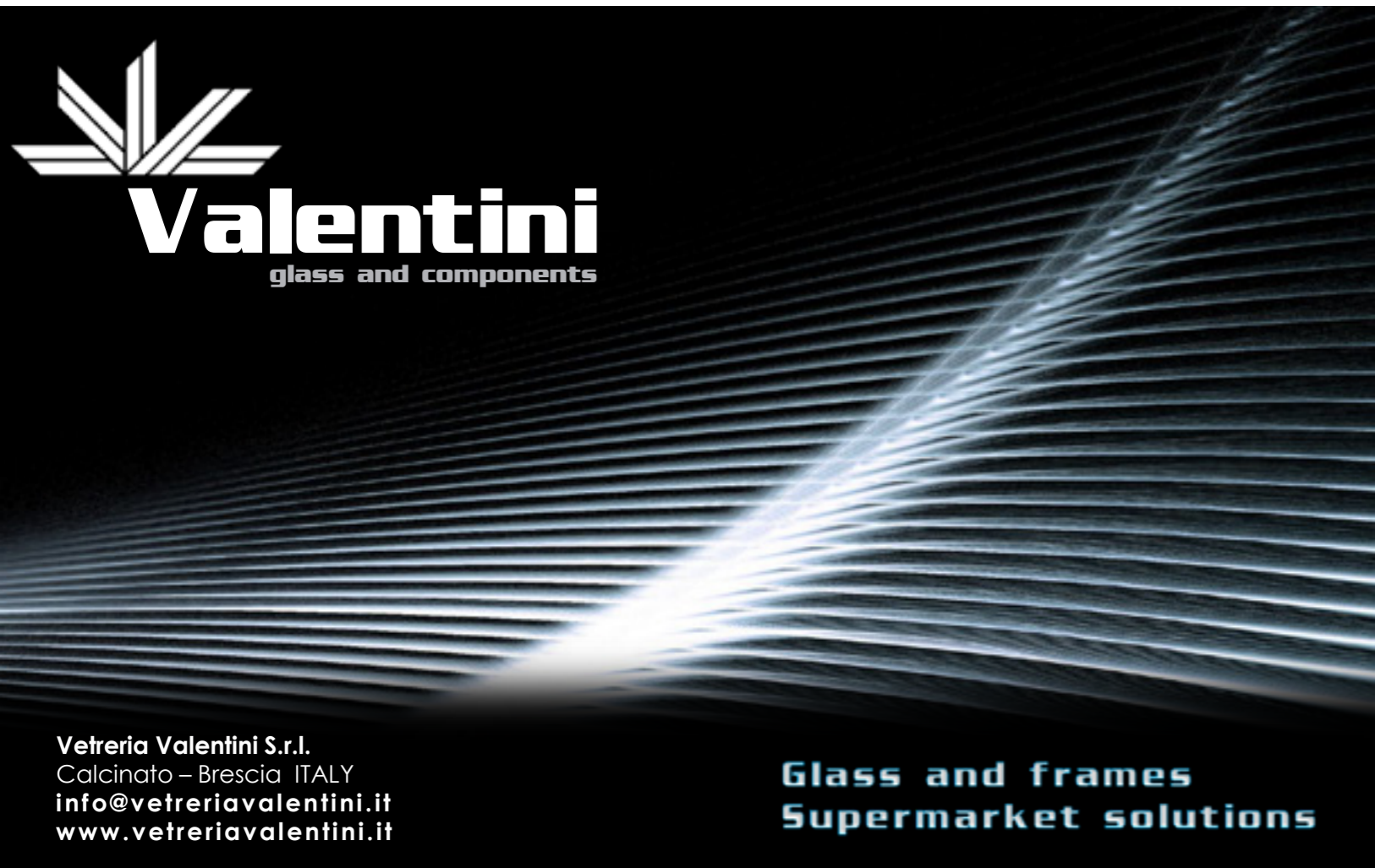
"We had a bit of a problem with hitting the next five-year plan because of the global economic recession where we lost roughly 15 to 18 per cent of our turnover. However, already by 2010 we were back on track again. The company was sold again in 2013 to another private-equity company."

Despite these multiple shifts in ownership, AHT has thrived in a competitive market, remaining strong and agile as it works with other industry players. While AHT make 70-80 per cent of all parts used in their refrigeration systems, they buy the components they can't make themselves through stable and loyal supply relationships. Hans says the AHT team works very closely with suppliers.

"We are developing new products with our suppliers and partners. That means that we help them with their development and they send it to us. We also send out our own engineers to our suppliers and partners to help them to be more structured and efficient."

This close working relationship has resulted in a lot of collaboration and communication between AHT and its suppliers and partners. In a unique system, AHT provides 70 per cent of a contract to one supplier and 30 per cent to another to foster a collaborative and competitive spirit.

It's this spirit which infuses AHT and drives the company forward. Hans and his team have set an ambitious goal of hitting a turnover of €1 billion in the next three to four years. With a world-leading product portfolio, a dedicated team of employees, and an impressive investment in innovation, AHT Cooling Systems is ready to hit that target and lead the global market. •



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