

SUSTAINABLE Surfaces

Forbo Flooring Systems is taking a sustainable step forward with strategies in place to look after the planet, people, and profit in order to make this a longstanding commitment.

Images by Carlo Baudone

When it comes to floor coverings, Forbo Flooring Systems is a global player. The business manufactures environmentally friendly, functional, and design-orientated floors, mainly for the commercial market, but also for the residential market.

Harald Burgstaller is the General Manager for Northern Europe, while also holding the role of Managing Director for Sweden. When he joined the company, it was with the intent to grow the business organically in the Nordics, something he has a track record of achieving in past positions. Harald has a broad background from the building industry, so he has ample knowledge and experience. After joining as general manager, he spent a few months analysing the situation to really understand what needed to be done and to develop a strategic growth plan for Northern Europe.

“This was done by travelling around in the region talking to customers and salespeople and interviewing them to understand the mechanism behind a sales success—asking what the customer needs and if we can do anything different. Looking at the potential for product groups and customer segments, trying to understand if we are missing something, and identifying how our own organisation is organised compared with customer demands. It all came down to analysing the situation from the customer’s point of view.

“After some drafts and internal discussions in the management group, we came up with our best proposal for a growth strategy. There was already a global divisional flooring strategy in place and most of it also fitted into my own analysis. Based on the local situation and local customer demands, I adjusted the strategy for the Nordic area. For instance, sustainability and environment

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aspects are something that the market focuses on in the Nordics. The new Nordic strategy was developed last autumn and now we are just in the middle of implementing the new projects and activities.

“One important local difference is that the Forbo brand is very well known in Sweden. We have a very good reputation in the region. Forbo has been around for 119 years and is a strong brand. It all started in 1896 in the small town of Forshaga in the Värmland County, then under the name Forshaga Linoleum. In 1928, Forshaga Linoleum joined the Continentale Linoleum Union [CLU] with other leading linoleum manufacturers. The union had its headquarters in Zürich—there is our first Swiss connection. In 1974, the CLU changed the name to Forbo, and in Sweden we were well known as Forbo Forshaga. Today we are Forbo Flooring Systems and the company is listed on the Swiss Stock Exchange with



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a corporate head office outside of Zürich, a divisional head office outside Amsterdam, and a Nordic head office in Gothenburg.”

Sustainability is something that Forbo prides itself on as it works to create better environments. The business follows the United Nations definition of sustainability, which is based around planet, people, and profit.

“Planet is improving the environmental impact of processes, and people is the social responsibility that we have in a big company. The last one is profit. First of all, you need to be profitable. That is the most important thing—to be profitable to be able to invest in making the environment more sustainable. At Forbo, we also have our own internal targets on what we want to do with this sustainability policy. We want to achieve a 25-per-cent reduction of our CO2 emissions, a program that we are running between 2009 and 2015



in which we are positive in coming close to reaching these goals.

“My role is to translate our initiatives to a level where my customer understands why we are a sustainable company. The first and most important thing for that is that we are the world market leader with the most sustainable product of 97-per-cent renewable raw materials. What I need to do

in my sustainability communication here in Northern Europe is to drill down and to let the customer know what’s in it for him if he chooses Forbo as a partner.

“Forbo’s linoleum product, which we are well known for, is made from renewable raw materials, and you need much less energy to produce it. I think linoleum is the future product for the Nordic



market. It has the best environmental properties besides being very durable and having attractive designs. Linoleum will always be our flagship product but to be the best flooring partner we need products that the customers demand. Today we are the flooring company in the Nordics that has the broadest offer. For instance, we have a unique product called Flotex, which looks like a textile product and has vinyl properties. We are also the only flooring company that has its own production of an entrance system. This is important since having clean shoes is the best way of

having a long-lasting floor. Creating better environments is not only about products—it starts with ourselves.”

Forbo employees receive extensive training in sustainability to learn about what it means for them and what they can do to help—everything from switching off the lights to not leaving phone chargers plugged in. The aim is to make participants aware that everyone can do small things to help the long-term future of the environment.

Forbo is working hard to develop new products and concepts. A

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group has been set up for product managers, sales personnel, and customers to come together twice a year and decipher what the needs and demands are from the market. It’s a well-organised and structured way to make changes to Forbo’s product catalogue.

“On the innovation side of things, there is another team that works with more long-term development. The flooring industry is conservative in a way, and completely new floors don’t trade every year, so it’s more about fine-tuning existing surfaces. You do a little bit with this, a little bit with that, but the future is riding on that environmental impact, especially in Northern Europe,” Harald says. “Development is ongoing all the time, and in the >

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future we will also trade completely new types of floors. This is something that the innovation team is working on right now.”

Harald believes the future is looking bright for Forbo. “It has been around in Sweden since 1896 and will be around for a long time in the future. We want to continue to be the leader in sustainable floors, and our vision is to become a global leader in commercial flooring systems by creating sustainable solutions for our customers.” •



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