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Material World

For more than a century and a half, Benninger has been providing innovative and forward-thinking solutions for textile manufacturers and has watched the industry evolve to what it is today.

Images by Thomas Glauser

Few companies that are still successful today can trace their origins back over 150 years. Swiss giant the Benninger Group, can. The company was founded in 1859 in the town of Uzwil in the northeast of Switzerland. To put this into perspective, the year Benninger was founded, France was still under Napoleonic rule, Charles Darwin had only just published his *On the Origin of Species*, and Big Ben chimed its bells for the very first time.

In 1859, Switzerland was in the midst of a period of industrialisation and economic growth, which had begun more than 10 years earlier when the first section of the country's rail network was constructed. Many parts of Europe were booming due to the Industrial Revolution, and technological advancements in machinery were accelerating. Benninger, primarily producing machinery and solutions for textile manufacturers, thrived in the environment.

The company continued to grow, and in 1900 started exporting

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- Gerhard Huber

machinery. In the 1990s, it established its first branches outside of Europe in China, India, Germany, and Russia. Benninger strongly believes its history and legacy is important; it acknowledges that today's and tomorrow's innovations and customer relations are based on the experiences and know-how of the past. Today, the company faces challenges with a changing industry and another surge in technology development, something current CEO Gerhard Huber is confident the company can overcome as it has before.

Gerhard joined Benninger 12 years ago as the COO and was promoted to CEO in 2011. Having worked as an executive in the company for years, he understood what needed to be done to ensure the continued success of Benninger. Gerhard says that in any industry, you need to ensure your company has a consistent strategy to deal with change. “There have been changes in the industry and it's always important to define the right strategy and to position the company to find the right product offering for the

future and to be a future partner in the industry.

“That's the important thing—to have the right product market positioning and to generate differentiations to our competition. We can say that we are the market and technology leaders and we will follow this strategy. Through innovation, we have to generate differentiations, advanced products, and the best available technology and therefore generate for our customers added value—that's the most important thing.”

This strategy is important for Benninger as the industry shifts more and more from being Europe-based to Asia-based, Gerhard says. “As you can imagine, the industry is a very dynamic industry, which has shifted in the last 20 to 30 years from Europe to Asia. The main market today is Asia. The shifting of the industry means also in the future we will have a local competition in Asia, and that's a challenge. And on the other side, the more important thing is the technological development in terms of energy efficiency, carbon footprint and the use of resources. >



“As a technology leader, we invest a lot of money into the product and process development and sometimes you have trends for copycat products which are copies of your technologies. That’s the big challenge—to convince the customer to go for a long-term approach and to have a partner for the whole solution and process, not only for the machine.”

However, Benninger has put strategies in place to combat these developments. It has subsidiaries in China and India and local, highly experienced employees to work in close cooperation with customers in those regions. Benninger focuses heavily on hiring the right people for these positions to ensure the best possible relationships and partnerships with customers.

“Because the Asian market is so important, we also have started some operation activities in Asia to provide more customer focus and attention in these markets. In the main markets, we have local service engineers to be directly on the customer’s side and to support our customers all the time and for the whole life cycle.

“It’s very important to have local services and competences to support the customers in a quick and adequate way, and it’s also important to understand the specific market and product requirements of the customers in the specific regions. You can imagine Asian customers or American customers or European customers have different requirements, or a different thinking about product requirements. With local employees who understand the

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thinking of the local people and who understand local requirements and customer needs, it’s a real advantage for Benninger.”

One of the key aspects of Benninger’s strategy is having a holistic approach to the business and the company’s customers. Gerhard and his team understand that they can’t do everything in house, and instead focus on the core competences like process consulting, technology, engineering, product development, market management, and customer service. The company works with its customers to develop solutions that are technologically advanced and sustainable.

“As already mentioned, this calls for a holistic approach to ensure long-term and significant improvement with respect to the careful use of resources, energy efficiency and CO2 emissions.”

The use and continuous development of ‘best available technologies’ is mandatory in order to secure sustainable textile production. This requires close cooperation with the customer and retailers so that the needs and requirements of the entire process chain can be taken into account in product development.

“At Benninger, we believe in a comprehensive system solution approach which offers customers a long-term, sustainable solution in terms of methods, productivity, operating costs and environmental impact.”

One of the other focuses Benninger has in product development is the environmental aspect of any machinery it produces. “For this holistic approach, in order to ensure a long-term and significant improvement with respect to the careful use of resources, to improve energy efficiency and to optimise the carbon footprint balance, Benninger is continuously developing its products and solutions. For our industry that’s very important. Our customers use a lot of resources like water, steam, energy and

chemicals, and are demanding to optimise it.

“In spite of the production processes, the textile industry must maintain their competitiveness and sustainability over the long term. For our segment, the processing and finishing segment, this means in particular using less resources. That’s very important in the future to fulfil this requirement for the industry and for the customers. That’s our philosophy. It requires a holistic approach and Benninger is involved here in the development and innovation of this kind of solution as the technology leader.”

Despite the challenges and changes in the industry, Gerhard believes that Benninger is in a strong position for the future. It is a worldwide business that is focusing

its attention on the markets where the textile industry is located or has moved, rather than staying still and stagnating. For Gerhard, though, it’s the company’s expertise and experience which really sets it apart and ensures that it is future proof. “We provide highly engineered and highly advanced products to support the principle of best available technology and to this end we are also supporting the broadening intensive cooperation with specific customers in various uses of applications.

“It means we work together with the customers, the end users [retailers], and also with the leading system suppliers and technology providers to understand the future requirements of the market and the products, and to understand the technology and applications. Then we can bring it back to our products to provide to our customers the best advanced processes and products. It’s also important to understand we’re not just a machine supplier; we are a



solution provider. In other words, our clients do not need only products—they need solutions. At Benninger, customer benefits and needs are the central focus of all our activities. It means high quality, process know-how, many years of specialist competence, unique application know-how, local availability and flexibility. These qualities make us a reliable solution provider for the textile industry. We have a rich history for more than 150 years, and as a company with international operations we are proud to support our customers on a basis of partnership and carry Swiss values such as high quality, reliability, and trustworthiness out into the world to our customers.”



“Benninger is a very important business partner of Erhardt+Leimer. E+L has supplied automation technology solutions to Benninger for more than half a century, in this way contributing to the company’s first-class finishing machines. Our main field of cooperation is web guiding equipment.”
- Klaus Baumann, Head of Textiles Sales Division, Erhardt+Leimer

“Lenze is proud to be a supplier and worldwide partner of the Benninger Group. Technology and partnership are the two keywords in this collaboration. They require our best solutions in terms of technology and total cost of ownership.” - Konrad Meier, Managing Director, Lenze Switzerland

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