

BEKUM BREAKING THE MOULD



BEKUM IS A BUSINESS FUELLED BY INNOVATION. WE LOOK AT HOW THEY'VE CONTINUED TO INNOVATE OVER THE LAST 60 YEARS.

BREAKING THE MOULD

PROJECT MANAGED BY: NEIL STOWE

Bekum was founded in Germany in 1959 by Gottfried Mehnert as a family business built on the foundation of some groundbreaking developments in the field of extrusion moulding. It's a legacy that continues today, as Gottfried's son, Michael Mehnert, a Managing Director in the firm, explains, "The technology this company was founded on is now used in every blow moulding machine in the world today. So the company grew very fast, it expanded internationally. The Berlin Wall was closed at that time so we couldn't expand there, but in 1969 we started out in Austria, and ten years after that we moved into the United States. So, in 2019, we celebrated 40 years in the USA, 50 years in Austria, and 60 years in Berlin."

"Bekum covers a range of different industries, from food and beverage packaging such as ketchup bottles, milk bottles, to consumer packaging including cosmetics, shampoo, and household cleaning products. They also produce industrial packaging, canisters, and drums for the food industry. "Our extrusion blow moulding technology produces PET handle-ware that's very special because usually, you can't produce a PET bottle with a handle on. That is big business for us right now in the US with those big refrigerators with juice bottles you want a handle on. So, it is something recently developed that is going well for us," Mehnert tells us. "We're quite specialised in our field. We work in pharmaceutical extrusion blow moulding for the cleanroom. Materials for inhalers, very small bottles produced under special conditions, that meet FDA guidelines then we're also active in the automotive field. We're one of two or three big companies building the machines for plastic fuel tanks in cars." >>



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These include moulding machinery for piping in car manufacture and technical parts for children's car seats. Bekum works in a broad variety of industries and the demands of their customers can be very different, covering a global area from South America to Europe to Asia.

But whatever the industry or geographic market sector, innovation is the fuel that keeps Bekum's engine running.

"We make some ground-breaking developments, such as those made by my father," Mehnert says. "These new PET handle-ware developments or our focus on special solutions for individual customers demonstrate our commitment to innovation. We can design the machine to the needs of the customer, designing every piece of the machine only for that customer. We're not the cheapest in the market, we're in the premium segment, but the process is one that leads to customer satisfaction."

Michael meanwhile has deeply involved himself in this process, drawing on his background in mechanical engineering.

"I started in mechanical engineering, and then really came into the company," he says. "We had plans to bring production to Austria. So I said okay, I will go with the company to Austria to build something there. When I came into the company it was a question for me of where will the company go to, what is its future vision. We had advisors and did a thorough strategy process internally."

A NEW LOOK

In some ways, this strategy would mean doing things differently to how Bekum has done them before, but Bekum has never been afraid of changing things up.



“We focus on these things, quality, technology and service and especially with the technology we’ve started new things such as machine design. For my father, it was always important for the last 60 years to build the machines himself, and it was a solid machine design that it works for 20 or 30 years in the field. But how it looks was not so important,” Mehnert says. “We’re in a new time and the design of the machine is now important. We want to be a technology leader, so we’ve worked with a German design office to start a new machine design. We want it to look like what the customer expects when they buy an extensive machine from a technology leader.”



The new designs include touch screen interfaces, a look that has fewer buttons and more of an industry 4.0 aesthetic, as well as taking advantage of new technologies such as AI.

“It can measure temperatures, electricity usage, water and you can access all this data in a web browser and compare the data to see where issues come from and control the quality of production,” Mehnert explains. “We want to bring technology to bear in a more intelligent way.”

Other technological innovations include looking at the ways that Bekum’s products use energy. The business has brought out a new extrusion line because this is the most energy-demanding part of the blow moulding process, and their new extruder uses 20% less energy. They are also replacing

hydraulics with more energy-efficient electrical drives.

“An industry topic that’s everywhere now is plastics and the circular economy,” Mehnert explains. “We have already for a long time had the technology available with three-layer spiral taps where one bottle has three layers with 10% new material on the outer and inner layer but 80% regrind in between, so we’re able to implement solutions here.”

SOURCING TALENT

Of course, the only way to find innovation is to have access to people who can create that innovation.

“It’s a bit difficult,” Mehnert admits. “You have to differentiate between Berlin, a big city with lots of engineers and educated people, and places like Austria where we’re more in the countryside. We do a lot of training; we have a student programme here as well as an apprenticeship program in the US where there isn’t a system like Germany for student placements.”

Of course, it’s not just about recruiting talent, it’s also about making sure that talent is retained.

“In Austria now we have a team where we do ski days, but also we try to bring them in to give them more education, additional training where it makes sense,” Mehnert points out. “The most important thing really is that you give trust to the employees that they can develop their own ideas.”

Look forward, Mehnert is excited about just how those ideas might develop.

“We’re developing to match with the global economy. 2019 was not a good year for the whole blow moulding industry. Automotive investments went almost down to zero, but also elsewhere the discussion around Brexit, the global economy declined and we really saw that. But I think we’re seeing a chance to develop new processes and that will grow out,” he says. We’re working with customers who might have new ideas on how to realise that.”

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