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Sustainability and New Energies

The OLBRICH Group and its brand Polytype Converting are looking positively into the future: Especially in the areas of sustainability and “New Energies”, the Bocholt, Germany-based company has identified many opportunities for growth – and some of them have already been realised. C2 in an exclusive interview with managing director Esa-Matti Aalto and product manager Bernd Theling.

C2: Let's first look back at the year 2021: Mr Aalto, how would you sum up the past 12 months?

Esa-Matti Aalto: Fortunately, we have a diversified product portfolio – and that has benefited us a lot in 2021. We have received orders from all the industries in which we are represented! In this respect, we were able to position ourselves very well everywhere – even in the classic areas such as wallcoverings, flooring, medical, labels & tapes, packaging, decor, etc. These areas form the backbone of our company. At the same time, we could observe that the demand for what we call “New Energies” continues to grow. But of course there were also challenges in 2021, such as the problem of supply shortages. Fortunately, we were able to compensate for these very well. In the



Esa-Matti Aalto



Bernd Theling



would also like to expressly praise the good partnerships with our suppliers! The challenge of supply bottlenecks is becoming ever greater – and this by no means only affects the converting industry . . .

C2: Home office, where possible, is now firmly established at OLBRICH and Poly-type Converting?

E.-M. Aalto: Exactly. It has proved very successful! With the combination of home office and the observance of distance rules in the company buildings, as well as the use of tools like MS Teams, we have no loss of efficiency in important areas like engineering.

Of course, we enjoy having personal contact – especially with our customers and partners. However, as I predicted last year, there will be fewer face-to-face meetings in the future, but they will be of higher quality!

In the second half of 2021, we actually travelled a lot again. Although it is associated with a certain risk, travelling in these times is associated with so many restrictions that you actually feel very safe again. We were in Asia and North and South America – and fortunately nothing happened. On-site, it was all the more important for us to hold high-quality meetings with the corresponding positive results.

C2: Let’s discuss skilled workers: What is the situation with applicants at the moment? Are there any bottlenecks?

E.-M. Aalto: If we regard the entire industry, it is still the case that there is a bottleneck – with a corresponding competition for trained resources. We are constantly looking for new talent to expand our business. It is helpful for us that we work at several locations. At

all our locations, we are considered a very attractive employer, which is in demand accordingly.

C2: You have already mentioned the area of “New Energies”: Can you briefly explain to our readers what activities are behind this and what goals you are pursuing?

E.-M. Aalto: “New Energies” is a megatrend topic that is really on everyone’s lips – by the way, also in our core market of coating! Especially in the areas of batteries and fuel cells, we are experiencing increasing demand and have placed corresponding projects. We see ourselves here at the spearhead of the development of electromobility in the broader sense – and “Made in Europe”! As a machine and line manufacturer, we supply the “tools” and also the process know-how for our sub-sector. We want to be at the forefront of the high dynamics that prevail here, because it is not at all foreseeable what will be possible in five or ten years.

C2: Let’s move on to the area of sustainability – and thus to Bernd Theling’s special expertise. Can you briefly outline your tasks within the OLBRICH Group?

Bernd Theling: Yes, with pleasure! I have been with the company for just under 10 years (in the areas of process engineering and project planning) and have been working in strategic product management since April last year. I mainly take care of the harmonisation and standardisation of our line concepts – across all locations. Since the end of 2021, I have also been responsible for the sustainability strategy adopted by the

end, we were able to complete all our projects satisfyingly. These challenges will certainly still be with us in 2022.

All in all, 2021 was a very stable and successful year for us – despite all the lockdowns, travel restrictions and port closures.

C2: A follow-up question about the delivery bottlenecks: how quickly do you actually have to react here?

E.-M. Aalto: It is highly beneficial that we are informed promptly by our material suppliers so that we can still react in time. However, there have also been situations in which this has happened at such short notice that we have had to quickly procure replacements from our network. Fortunately, this also worked! I

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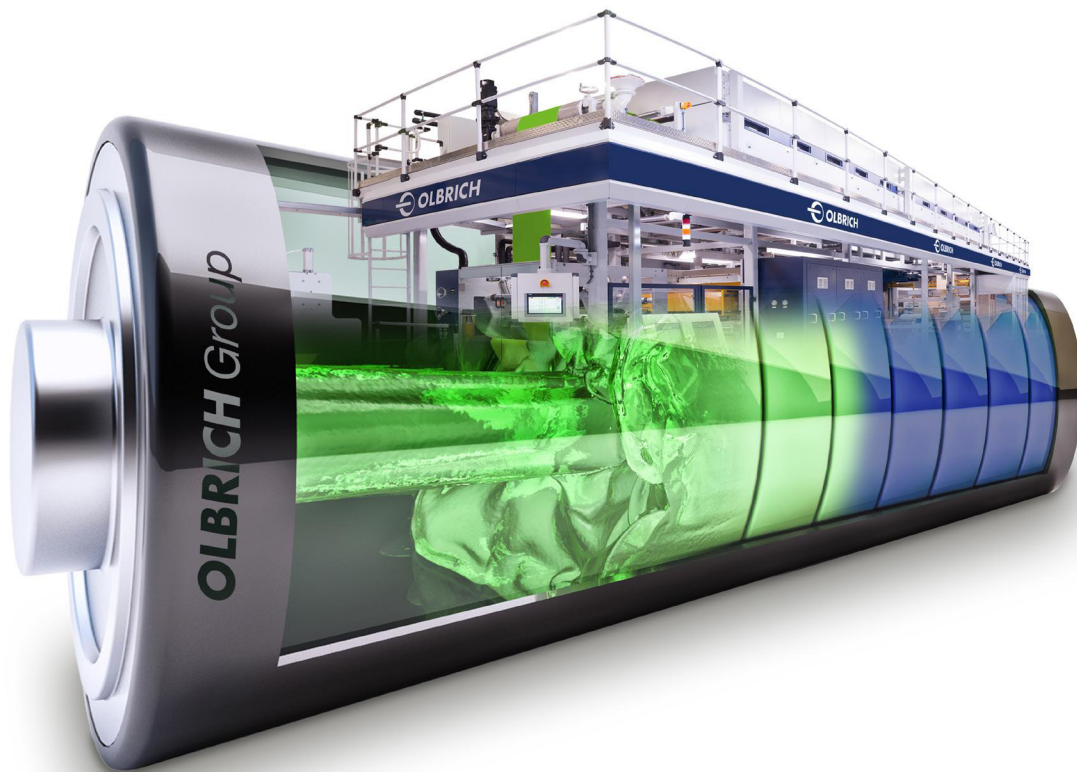
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“New Energies” is a megatrend – also at OLBRICH

management. Even though our sustainability strategy is quite new, the corporate group has already invested in sustainable thinking and action in recent years and decades. For a long time, we have had interdisciplinary engineering teams that, after receiving the respective customer specifications, have reactively developed corresponding tailor-made concepts all the way to the downstream process – in cooperation with the customer and our supplier network. With the new strategy, we want to move away from reactive thinking and towards an initiative and proactive approach.

C2: Has the demand for particularly sustainable processes increased noticeably in the recent past?

B. Theling: It is an interesting dynamic that has definitely had both high and low phases. This topic is very customer-specific: where is the customer located and what energy flows, reserves and capacities are available at the location? Above all, however, it is also a question of corporate policy. However, we are convinced that the dynamics will increase in the coming years. We want to be on the cutting edge here – both in terms of market requirements and the legal framework. Here, we rely on clear strategic partnerships and on intelligent solutions such as our energy-efficient booster kit for the wallcovering industry.

However, some topics may only bear fruit in five to ten years – here I am thinking of artificial intelligence and the next steps in digitalisation. The energy optimisation, or self-optimisation, of machines would be an example of this.

C2: How can we imagine AI in the case of OLBRICH/Polytype Converting?

B. Theling: Less downtime, extensive data collection and evaluation as well as energetic optimisation potential – we can achieve a lot here. Nevertheless, special machine construction cannot be compared with series production, of course, because the tasks and error messages are sometimes massively different and of a very individual nature.

After all, the corresponding algorithm always has to be trained before it can act on its own. Here, our vision is more long-term than medium-term.

E.-M. Aalto: Nevertheless, we can derive concrete projects from this basic work – I am alluding to predictive maintenance: the machine detects the error in advance, gives an appropriate signal and enables us to take countermeasures at an early stage. While these technologies will soon be the norm, the emergence of the self-optimising machine will follow step by step. Especially in terms of the energy concept – CO₂ savings

included – this machine would have an enormous advantage.

C2: OLBRICH/Polytype Converting is also expanding its activities in the digital printing sector. What can you report here?

E.-M. Aalto: Digital printing is one of our strategic development projects that has also been running for some time and is about to be industrialised. We have a pilot project in Germany in which wallcoverings are printed digitally. The focus is on the individualisation of wallcovering: we enable the printing of own, customer-specific motifs on an industrial scale in single-pass. In the next step, we want to extend the concept to floor coverings. Here, too, we have initial development projects with RICOH. We see great business potential there for the future. All this runs alongside analogue wallcovering printing, where we are the world market leader. It's not about replacing this conventional technology, but creating an add-on for it. Many people no longer buy their wallcovering in the hardware store, but order it online.

Special collections and uploads of own motifs play an important role here. Buying behaviour has changed significantly in the wake of Covid-19. This gives digital printing processes a completely different status than two to three years ago.

C2: The OLBRICH Group continues to expand its worldwide network of locations and service offerings. What is the latest news here?

E.-M. Aalto: Last year we proudly reported in C2 that we had expanded the local sites. We were in the right place at the right time, so to speak, given the corona period. Especially in North America and Asia, this additional presence has helped us a lot. We have taken this tailwind with us and strengthened ourselves considerably, especially in North America. Besides Germany and Europe, North America is now the most important market for us! The business with mechanical and electrical retrofits is particularly noteworthy here. This, in turn, has resulted in new enquiries for major projects that we might not have received in the past. Being close to our customers has helped us enormously, which is why we continue to invest heavily in expanding our capacities. This benefits our service team in particular, but also automation technology.

The situation in Asia is similar: we are not yet as advanced there as in America, but in view of the strict quarantine rules in

China, our cooperation with local partners there is a real benefit! Global action with local partners is the measure of things and will continue to advance. We want to be very close to our customers, which is why we rely on our own locations with our own staff.

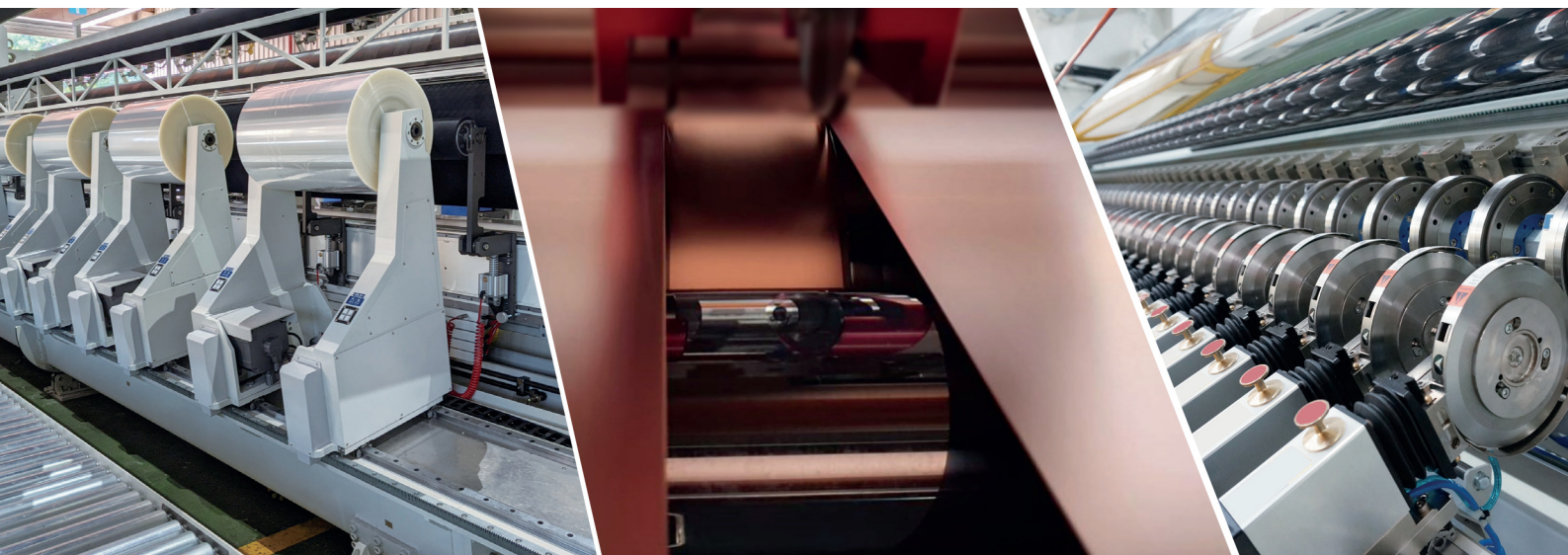
C2: What is your message to customers from the traditional coating market?

E.-M. Aalto: We see ourselves as the solution partner for all questions, concerns, ideas and future concepts of our customers. The megatrends of sustainability, mobility, artificial intelligence, etc. are in high demand and require us to be a real partner for the respective industry. Here, we are also prepared to enter into cooperations with competitors – for the benefit of the industry. These topics are too important to be pursued “solo”. In the packaging industry, the sustainability issue is certainly at the top of the list. Legislatively, the topic is also gaining momentum. As a machine manufacturer, we are challenged to develop the “tools” that enable our customers to reduce their ecological footprint.

C2: When looking to the future, the vexed topic of rising raw material and delivery costs cannot be omitted at the moment. How do you assess the situation for your company?

E.-M. Aalto: For our supply chain, we are very closely monitoring the development of the prices and raw materials relevant to us. In addition to steel, this includes drive and electrical components. Thanks to an intelligent purchasing policy, we were able to manoeuvre through this minefield relatively unscathed. Nevertheless, the price explosion could of course be felt. Our biggest concern at the moment is the availability of electrical components, which continues to manifest itself in the wake of the chip shortage. In the steel market, the situation seems to be stabilising and we have the supply chains under control. Whether and how quickly the situation stabilises in electronics depends very much on China – and whether we will be able to ramp up our own capacity in Europe and North America. ■

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