Interview: “I believe that innovation is the engine of a company”

Founded in 1890, W&H today operates globally as a leading manufacturer of dental instruments and devices. With over 1,200 employees worldwide, the company exports its products to over 110 countries. The family-owned business runs two production sites in Burmoos and one in Brusaporto in Italy, as well as 19 subsidiaries in Europe, Asia and North America. Recently, W&H President Peter Malata sat down with Dental Tribune to discuss the enduring success and philosophy of the company.

Only a few dental companies worldwide can look back at a 125-year history. In your opinion, what are the main reasons for the long-standing success of W&H?

There are several factors to which I would attribute our successful participation in the dental market for such a long time. Firstly, innovation. W&H’s history is a story of numerous technological developments and innovations, such as the Roto Quick coupling, the first push-button chuck system for turbines, the first high-speed contra-angle handpiece for preparation up to 200,000 rpm; Assistina, the world’s first cleaning and maintenance unit; Lisa, the first Class B steriliser available on the market; Synea Vision, the first turbine with 3x ring LEDs; and our latest innovation, the Primea Advanced Air turbine. We have continuously provided products and services—tailored customer solutions made in Austria—that not only support dentists and their teams on a daily basis, but also make their daily work easier. Our products are used in dental practices, dental clinics, dental laboratories, and oral and maxillofacial surgeries in over 110 countries around the world.

Secondly, our internal apprenticeship programme is of particular priority to us. We regard this as an investment in the future. With our comprehensive training programme, we not only focus on the professional education of young people, but also support their personal development.

Third, we rely on continuity: we put an enormous amount of trust into our employees. Team spirit is of utmost importance to us. The level of education of our workforce

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W&H President Peter Malata

(Photograph: Gregor Sams/PunktFormStrich)
is very high and expertise is passed on from colleague to colleague. Additionally, we rely on a generational mix within our teams and a long-lasting staff membership, enabling continuity and thus productivity at a very high level.

As a member of the Malata family, you have headed the company for over 20 years. Looking back, what have been the most significant developments or achievements during that time?

I took over the business from my father, Consul Di Peter Malata, in 1996. My goal was not only to grow the business, but also to keep our processes lean. That’s why I decided in 1998 to introduce a team-oriented structure in the company, just to name one significant measure of many. Today, about 700 employees at our headquarters in Bürmoos are organised into over 100 teams.

Another important cornerstone was the internationalisation of W&H. Today, we operate three production sites—two in Bürmoos and one in Brußaporto—and 19 subsidiary companies around the globe.

How do you approach innovation at W&H?

The basis for W&H’s steady growth is the consistent employment of state-of-the-art technologies and a dedicated focus on research and development. I believe that innovation is the engine of a company and my personal goal is to create more room for it. The continuous expansion of our R & D department, which involves not only the hiring of additional staff, but also the creation of workplaces that allow for and foster creative collaboration and communication. In addition, we focus on collaboration with universities and research centres, as well as on obtaining ongoing feedback from users regarding their experiences.

Currently, around 13 per cent of our employees work in the R & D department at our headquarters. The focus of their activities is on innovative, high-quality medical devices and intelligent solutions for our customers and partners. The goal is optimal support for dentists in their day-to-day work with advanced hardware and software solutions. The close cooperation between the development and manufacturing departments has allowed W&H to respond quickly to changes in the market and incorporate customer requirements into new, sustainable solutions.

At W&H, “People have Priority”. Would you please explain the philosophy behind this slogan?

As a global dental company, we serve all people in maintaining and improving dental health. We are a family business and have been family-owned for 60 years. We strive for long-term, trusting and appreciative relationships with patients, customers, partners and employees, on which one can depend. Our corporate values—reliability, expertise, openness and sustainability—are therefore not just on paper, but actually realised.

In March 2018, you launched a new image campaign, “From a patient to a fan”. How has this influenced the perception of your company by patients and customers?

We have received very positive feedback on our new image campaign, directly from customers and partners, as well as via our social media channels. We want to make it clear to dentists and their practice teams that W&H is there for them as a solutions provider and does its utmost to support them in overseeing their daily challenges.

In practice, this means that our products offer true added value to the treatment process. By optimising and streamlining workflows, we want to enable dentists and their teams to give their undivided attention to patients throughout the treatment process. Since the light conditions in the mouth are usually poor, it is our task, for example, to ensure that our products provide sufficient light. When the dentist’s hands ache after a long day’s work, it is up to us to create lighter, more ergonomic instruments.

In addition, of course, the products have to work intuitively, reliably and, above all, precisely.

Our products are characterised not only by innovative solutions, but also by many small details that make a real difference in the daily work of our customers. You recently announced your acquisition of Swedish company Ostell. How has this step complemented your offering?

Ostell and W&H have successfully worked together since 2016. The first result of this cooperation was the new Implantmed with the integrated Ostell iSQ module.

Ostell is known for its implant stability measurement and osteointegration monitoring products. The acquisition was part of our strategy to expand into the surgical segment. Our aim is to broaden our competence and strengthen our position as a leader in the field of implantology.

In addition to your production facilities in Austria and Italy, you currently maintain subsidiaries in 19 countries around the world. What are the key markets for you, and where do you see most potential for growth in the future?

W&H is actively global and all our efforts are extended to all markets. We do of course have specific goals for the different markets according to their needs. To identify these, we have our 19 subsidiaries, 6 area managers, and a vast number of outstanding and reliable partners, who allow W&H to guarantee rapid delivery and seamless technical service anywhere in the world.

In recent years, we have also established subsidiaries in China and India and strengthened our sales activities in the Asia Pacific region. These are the markets in which we see the greatest potential at the moment.

The dental market is changing faster than ever before. What are your strategies for staying ahead in this challenging environment?

Our main goal is to provide true added value to our clients with all our products and services. As mentioned before, we are focused strongly on R & D and—I am personally very proud to say—doing so with great success. The Prisma Advanced Air, for example, recently received the Staatspreis Innovation (national innovation award) from the Austrian Ministry of Economy.

With the Prisma Advanced Air turbine, the rotation speed of the bur can now be set precisely and as a result of electronic regulation remains constant even when the contact pressure increases. In addition to the innovative drive technology, the turbine offers all the advantages of a W&H Synea Vision turbine.

Finally, the interconnectivity of our products and services is playing an increasing role, for example the option to control our tools via a smartphone or tablet, and automated inventory management and service scheduling.

Where do you see W&H in the next ten to 20 years?

W&H has further expanded its position in the global dental market. We are present in all core markets and respected by competitors.

Thank you very much for the interview.