

Managing a culture of innovation

Many businesses dream of being led by innovation, yet struggle to generate the revenues that only large-scale manufacturing can deliver. Bürkert Fluid Control Systems appears to have achieved both, so how is a genuine culture of innovation balanced by commercial pressures?

In a candid video interview Bürkert CEO Heribert Rohrbeck explains his outlook and how a 'techie's' take on the world can make for good business...

Customer satisfaction is at the heart of what Bürkert offers. What's the philosophy behind this?

'Bürkert has a distinctive culture of genuine personal development, integrity and care for its people, customers and suppliers - something that goes beyond corporate social responsibility for marketing and recruitment purposes and into the fabric of the organisation. Some of this culture is created by design and is part of the management philosophy, but much of it is nurtured simply because it allows personnel to relate better to customers, which translates into profitable business.

The first thing we remind ourselves about when looking at business-to-business customer interaction is that no one wakes up in the middle of the night and exclaims "I must buy a Bürkert valve", it is more likely that an engineer or designer will be thinking about finding the best solution to the challenge they face right now, be that a new design or a replacement for an existing system.

What is the design and manufacturing philosophy of the business and how does that apply to servicing customer needs and the generation of new products and ideas?

Our business is built around working with customers to find that ideal solution; we effectively put ourselves into the shoes of our customer and see it from their perspective. Sometimes that component or system turns into series production and we go on to manufacture tens of thousands of items, sometimes we produce just one unique solution – although it is usually constructed using one or more of the hundred thousand products and components we already have in our portfolio.

It isn't normally difficult to encourage our design and process engineers to support customers and work in partnerships, it's actually harder to create the kind of partnership relationship you need with your customers in order to develop a position of trust. Once achieved however it is from this point that you can stimulate really valuable creativity, problem solving and ideas. From then on, you are by definition - driving innovation.

You must have a good understanding of your customers business; how do you achieve this?

We value openness and trust, it makes for better collaborative working. It is our challenge from a management point of view to achieve the right balance between this trusting work culture, profitability and commercial strategy. There is an old adage that if you 'Chose a job that you love then you won't have to work a single day in your life'. This is only partly true, we have to go to work, but when we are given challenges that we can rise to and have some creative input, then that is very satisfying, and we make better decisions, and better judgement calls.

What is the philosophy behind how you develop high specification products and more standard catalogue products, and how do you ensure quality is consistent throughout the range?

Bürkert products are famous for being both reliable and demonstrating the application of advanced technology, as well as sitting firmly at the quality end of the market. They are sometimes close to being commodity items though - solenoid valves for example which are made in the tens of thousands, but, also frequently sold at a price premium. Balancing these seemingly contradictory characteristics of our product positioning is another challenge.

The philosophy behind how we develop high specification products and more standard catalogue products is that by looking at where we can add value for our customer and then looking at where he can add value to his customer, we draw the focus away from component purchase price and home in on making our customers more competitive. This might be in ensuring basic components do not fail and perform accurately throughout their life, or completely changing how a piece of process equipment is configured and constructed to offer an overall cost or operational advantage.

Bürkert offers over 100,000 different products; for a medium size manufacturer that is a huge inventory to support. How does your manufacturing, stock and distribution system handle this?

We are not a typical valve manufacturing company, it is part of our philosophy, set down by the founder of the company that where other companies stop, in terms of collaborative development, we must start. That still holds true today, as the only reason we have a live catalogue of over 100,000 different products is that each one has been developed to meet a challenge and provide a solution. For a medium size manufacturer, it is a huge inventory to support, but by using flexible lean manufacturing methods and keeping tight control over our stock and distribution systems we can support it, simply because it adds value to our customers.

Some Bürkert products are developed for customers as systems and some as stand-alone products. The design and manufacturing philosophy of the business is part of the culture – one of innovation. It is undoubtable that our flexibility and problem-solving prowess engenders loyalty and creates long lasting customer relationships based on trust. This allows us to develop profitable business relationships.

As a manufacturer that is moving process engineering forwards, how are you preparing for the future in terms of advancing product communication on an electronic level and accommodating the education of your internal and external audience?

The advancement of technology is an inevitable part of our future, but coping with change is sometimes our biggest personal challenge. Being part of a creative team and working on solutions that benefit our clients is central to our working principles. By making change part of our daily lives, the company as a whole is better equipped to handle change, moving into the future. The faster we can move, the more flexible the business is and by being more responsive we are able to take advantage of market changes and profit opportunities.

The first step for the team is to use their expertise to help the client understand all the available solutions and develop a design which will meet all the necessary specifications and standards as well as perform reliably and integrate with any existing infrastructure. By using 3D CAD animations or simulations combined with expert knowledge in manufacturing, materials and tool design, a firm production concept can be delivered at an early stage.

The way in which this translates into physical teams, buildings and working units is probably best illustrated by our extensive, flexible in-house manufacturing facilities and our use of the Systemhaus concept.

Bürkert designs and manufactures its entire product range, which requires extensive metal and plastic machining as well as injection moulding and 3D printing technology. Now this wealth of experience and knowledge can be used by OEMs to create solutions using the latest in design and materials technology.

Our main factories are specialised, but very flexible in terms of the detail and options included in what they produce. We are unusual in having our own chip manufacturing facility for example, so we can produce ruggedized processor chips that are fitted directly to process field devices, enabling us to create intelligent distributed automation networks for process environments such as food and pharmaceutical production sites.

The designs are driven by the extensive knowledge and experience that has been accumulated over the years spent perfecting Bürkert's own products. The ability to create original moulds using in-house machining facilities and printed circuit boards (PCBs) combined with the process and control valve technology of Bürkert, ensures that the client receives an optimised design from a single source.

Bürkert uses an international network of Systemhaus facilities to take requests from customers and develop them into finished products locally, using a philosophy developed over 15 years which allows the company's development engineers to pool resources and knowledge in order to solve problems at the Systemhaus design and development hubs. The whole process focuses on the clients' requirements and how they can be delivered by the best qualified team in the most efficient way.

Within the Systemhaus facility it is only a short distance between the design office and the production areas, which helps in the communication of the product definition to the production engineers, who have the ability in some cases to deliver a functional model within 24 hours. The project team can deliver sample components to the client along with all the necessary local and global approvals to ensure that the design can go into production.

For the OEM, the end result is an integrated system, sourced through one supplier, designed to be cost effective to manufacture and to deliver reliable service. In many cases the ability of the Bürkert engineers to think 'outside the box' has enabled a new design concept to be introduced to the OEM that will simplify manufacturing and reduce overall costs. We often also reduce time to market for new products.

What is the vision of the future for Bürkert?

The vision of the future for Bürkert includes global teams providing local support, understanding our customers and employing innovation to deliver the best solutions and service, putting customer satisfaction at the heart of what Bürkert offers.

Around the world we are establishing more Systemhaus locations and investing in the infrastructure to support our customers globally.

The power in the philosophy behind this growth is in understanding customer needs and then creating, delivering and managing added customer value. Using our flexible manufacturing combined with our wealth of already proven products and system solutions – when teamed with a culture of innovation – we can continue to give our customers a competitive advantage.

In short, we want our customer to view Bürkert consultants as unique partners for fluid control systems that they specifically insist on.

Image Captions:

Image 1: Bürkert CEO, Heribert Rohrbeck, explains his outlook and how a 'techie's' take on the world can make for good business.

Image 2: Around the world we are establishing more Systemhaus locations and investing in the infrastructure to support our customers globally.

Image 3: The Systemhaus facility is only a short distance between the design office and the production areas, which helps in the communication of the product definition to the production engineers.

About BÜRKERT

Bürkert Fluid Control Systems is one of the leading manufacturers of control and measuring systems for fluids and gases. The products have a wide variety of applications and are used by breweries and laboratories as well as in medical engineering and space technology. The company employs over 2,500 people and has a comprehensive network of branches in 36 countries world-wide.

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