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Die and Mould



INITIATIVE F+: Working together at eye level is smarter!

Interview with Daniel Käfer on April 26, 2021 by Nikolaus Fecht

Challenging months lie behind many companies in the tool and die industry. For many, it has been an exhausting balancing act between political confusion and industrial struggle for survival. Daniel Käfer from Besigheim-Ottmarsheim (Germany) does not have a patent remedy for the Corona pandemic and the time thereafter: In this volatile situation, the managing partner of Käfer Werkzeugbau GmbH relies on honest communication with his 30 employees and fair play of the clients.

1. Mr. Käfer, how did you and your company experience the two lockdowns?

We went into the first lockdown with a very stable order cushion, developed hygiene concepts and thus survived it relatively well. The second lockdown was somewhat marked by a decline in incoming orders, but I can hardly judge whether this is entirely due to Corona. Since the beginning of March, I have been sensing that the order intake is picking up again.

2. What are the current challenges?

The main issues are customer visits and on-site tool acceptance. It is of course difficult not to be able to meet physically.

3. Is it possible to commission a new tool completely online??

No, even though there are promising approaches with augmented reality. That's why we rely on partner companies that let us try out new tools on their presses. We need those pre-acceptances under our own control in order to reduce the effort required for commissioning at the customer's site.

4. How are your employees coping with the current situation?

Many of them are annoyed by the lockdown issue and the numbers. I also sensed a slight irritation in all of them. Therefore, I communicate increasingly with them via honest situation reports and also try to talk to each of them individually about what moves him or her, what worries are there? This kind of counselling is necessary when the world around you is in lockdown: Everyone is missing the embrace and the warmth. I notice this very strongly in social interactions.

5. How do you manage the crisis digitally?

The video conferences work quite well. Here's an anecdote: During an acceptance meeting with a key customer, it later turned out that the people involved on the customer side had been missing direct personal contact: Suddenly, the conversation therefore became very technocratic and bureaucratic. But this actually came up a day later - including an apology. There is now partly a sharpness in conversations that is never occurs when you sit together in a room. The physical contact is just missing. And that's why I'm not necessarily the biggest fan of video conferencing, although as a so-called digital native I was actually once a fan of the technology. However, I now no longer believe that we will be communicating with each other exclusively online in the future.

6. And simulation and animation?

That's increasing more and more: But that's not entirely new. The technologies are just being used more than before.

7. What about customer payment behaviour?

In the beginning of the first lockdown, we felt that everyone was holding the money together - just like during the financial crisis. The positive experience that things might go on a little differently - albeit with a certain handicap - significantly eased the situation again, and things have not worsened during the second lockdown. However, I know from some companies that they are suffering from liquidity problems as a result of rehearsal and acceptance delays.

8. Under the slogan "A plus for all", the VDMA Die and Mould Association has launched the Initiative Fairness⁺, in which your industry is working together with partners along the value chain to promote fair business relations. What do you want to achieve with this?

I am a strong supporter of the Initiative Fairness* because fair business practice helps everyone. No company benefits if a supplier goes bankrupt because he was gagged. Acceptances also relate to this issue: clear and realistic objectives for the acceptance criteria, ideally worked out jointly in advance, result-oriented milestones and agreements for delays for which the supplier cannot be held responsible, form the basic framework for a successful acceptance. I think it is extremely short-sighted to use technically flimsy arguments just to delay a payment. We should rather put our collective energy into technical solutions and innovation than into financial issues.

9. Do you have an example of an exemplary partnership that is encouraging?

A great example resulted from a project for a manufacturer of kitchen furniture when we jointly developed a modular tooling system for drawer runners. In advance, we jointly defined the criteria for acceptance, which were not characterized by any weird, technical nonsense. We agreed on a down payment because material procurement at the customer's was problematic in the lockdown. Two of our employees went additionally to the customer so that the project could proceed more quickly. Our staff was actively supported by the customer in the acceptance process. Thus, everything went very smoothly, fast, and very satisfactorily for both sides - and always at eye level! The bottom line is that both partners benefit the most from such an approach. After all, only well-positioned, healthy suppliers and equipment providers can secure the competitiveness of their customers in the long term.

10. However, we are still far from out of the proverbial "valley of tears": What's next for you?

We have been developing our business in the Polish market, for example, over the past year and a half. Of course, it is very difficult to establish contacts there at the moment. Nevertheless, we have used telephone calls to prepare the trips that we hope will soon be possible again and have been promised by the customer. If the vaccinations continue to progress, we will hopefully be able to visit customers again. And we are confident that our preliminary work and the offers will lead to new orders. Many signs point to this, and I am therefore quite optimistic about the future.

Company Profile

Käfer Werkzeugbau GmbH, founded in 1995 and based in Besigheim-Ottmarsheim near Ludwigsburg (30 employees), focuses on perfect craftsmanship in the manufacture of complex and high-quality toolmaking products. The company's portfolio ranges from the development, design, manufacture and sale of stamping, progressive and transfer tools, gauges and jigs to series machining and thermoforming. Customers include well-known companies in many sectors - from the automotive, electrical, furniture and packaging industries to plant and apparatus engineering. www.kaefer-wzb.de

Author

The interview was conducted by Nikolaus Fecht, a technical journalist from Gelsenkirchen, on behalf of VDMA Die and Mould Association. www.torial.com/nikolaus.fecht

INITIATIVE FAIRNESS⁺

Within the framework of the INITIATIVE FAIRNESS⁺ (F⁺), the toolmakers, together with their partners along the value chain, are committed to fair business relations under the motto "A plus for all" and also commit themselves to fair trade. Because only with a functioning supply chain of healthy companies can the industries jointly maintain and expand their technological and economic leading position in the world. Therefore, all business partners along the value chain are invited to join the INITIATIVE FAIRNESS⁺. www.fairnessplus.net

VDMA Die and Mould

The industrial manufacturers of stamping and forming tools, moulds, fixtures and standard parts have joined forces in the VDMA Toolmaking Association. This key industry equips the producers of series parts with highly productive operating resources. Die and mould makers not only constantly produce new customized moulds for the products of tomorrow, but also ensure with their service and maintenance services that their customers' production never stands still for long. Regional proximity to a competent tool manufacturer is therefore a great advantage for series producers. www.vdma.org/die-and-mould