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KEEN ON NEW THINGS.

For 20 years, **Friedr. Freek GmbH** has been supplying **heating elements for the moulds of Otto Hofstetter AG**. The family enterprise in the German town of Menden is the global leader in this field and permanently busy holding its position. **General Managers Wolfgang and Stefan Kaiser** and **authorized signatory Michael Ablas** rely on the self-responsibility and cooperation of their employees and partners.

For 20 years, the German-Swiss cooperation has been working extremely well: Wolfgang Kaiser, Wilhelm Kaiser, Michael Ablas and Stefan Kaiser from Friedr. Freek GmbH with Stefan Zatti (centre) from Otto Hofstetter AG.

“Sometimes in life, one needs to be lucky. However, without expertise in the particular field, success won’t come, either.” This is the emphasized and philosophical conclusion that Wilhelm Kaiser draws from his 30 years with Friedr. Freek GmbH. As Kaiser points out himself, he probably has both luck and expertise, judging from what the company looks like today.

Diplomatic flair of the wife.

“The company founder, Friedrich Freek, engaged me as a technical expert in heating elements and asked me to whip the operation into shape. Already on my first working day, i.e. on 1 January 1970, I got the feeling that I had no easy task on my hands.” Despite of a major effort on his part, nothing changed within a reasonable time, which is why he handed in his notice and left the place. “My wife then got a phone call from Mrs Freek. She invited us to visit them privately at their home to discuss things once more in peace and quiet.” The mission was successful. Wilhelm Kaiser returned and got a free hand to organise the company’s development as he thought right and proper.

Embarking on a new era.

At that time, Friedr. Freek GmbH primarily made heating elements for household appliances. In addition to Freek’s parent company, the Märkische Metallwerke (Metal Works of Mark Brandenburg), Krupp, Zanussi and the Swedish company Asko were among the customers at the time. Wilhelm Kaiser planned his private holidays so that a call at a customer’s was either along the route or easily feasible from the holiday destination. In spite of his tireless efforts, Freek was involuntarily caught up in the bankruptcy of the parent company in 1983. But Wilhelm Kaiser believed in the future of “his” products and launched a new era as sole managing director of Friedr. Freek GmbH, endowed with the bank’s trust and majority shareholding.

Mixed products a model for success.

While the medium-sized enterprise is still domiciled in Menden, it belongs entirely to the family and is now managed by Wilhelm Kaiser’s sons Wolfgang and Stefan. They rely on the support of about 60 employees and achieve annual sales of approximately EUR 9 million. The production and trading company is recognised globally as a specialist in process heat and develops, produces and distributes electrical industrial heating elements for the plastics and packaging industry. “Our products from own manufacture in combination with trading goods give us the opportunity to offer the market a comprehensive range in spite of our manageable size.”

Based on his good experiences, Wolfgang Kaiser regards this mix as a recipe for success. The production of highly innovative HotMicroCoils, often used as nozzle-heating elements for hotrunners in plastic injection moulding, is now the most important business segment of Friedr. Freek GmbH.

“THE SUCCESS OF OUR COMPANY IS OWED TO OUR LONG- STANDING CUSTOMERS.”

Wolfgang Kaiser, General Manager

Long-standing customers are the foundation.

Like in the times of the father, technical expertise is one of the most important pillars of the flourishing enterprise. Stefan Kaiser holds a degree in mechanical engineering and, together with his brother, is responsible for the company. His speciality are the project management and all technical issues. In his search for effective solutions, he is supported by Michael Ablas. “Michael has been at the company for 25 years and contributed substantially towards our ability to build up and successfully develop the high-tech production of nozzle-heating elements.” Friedr. Freek GmbH owes the rapid development and the present leading role in this area to Michael’s expertise in matters of electrical heat technology. Remarkable progress has been made in this field: “In the last 25 years we and our long-standing customers have grown steadily, with new record sales in each of the last eight years.” Existing customers enjoy top priority with Wolfgang Kaiser and his colleagues in the management. “We feel committed to our long-standing customers and always try to serve them with useful delivery times and professional advice.”

Innovation as part of the DNA.

With two passionate engineers in the company management, it is not surprising that innovation is also highly important to this family business. “We have been active in production research for about 20 years and operate a Technology team which meets every two weeks. Without any particular directive, they ask themselves which problem in the market is waiting to be solved by us.” According to Stefan Kaiser, the ideas come from the Friedr. Freek GmbH’s Complaints and Innovation Management departments. “These projects are driven by the motivation of the team members, which gives them a much better chance for success.” Supplementary to the internal projects, the company cooperates with various external research teams as well as technical universities.

Projects with very promising names emerged from this: Eucopet, Lean, Low2High or StraKosphere. The results of these projects are so convincing that European and national research institutions are interested in them, and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research even regularly involves Freek in the set-up of its research framework programmes.

The power of cooperation.

Cooperation is a further pillar on which today's success of Friedr. Freek GmbH rests. The philosophy of "Cooperation beats competition" explains the relationship with customers and suppliers as well as the internal organisation. "To describe the organisation, we do not use a box model, but the analogy of an organic cell. The management forms the nucleus, surrounded by the cell areas of purchasing, distribution, marketing, production and service." According to Stefan Kaiser, who developed this model together with his brother and documented it in a book, this type of organisation encourages independent working. That said, it is important to have fellow workers who get to grips with these working conditions and the transparency as regards the ongoing projects and the course of business.

"TO DESCRIBE THE ORGANISATION, WE USE THE ANALOGY OF AN ORGANIC CELL."

Stefan Kaiser, General Manager

Virtual size makes us strong.

Cooperation is also an important part of the innovation project Eucopet. Organisationally, the plan initiated in the mid-1990s is based on a network of competitors. "The positive effect of this cooperation on motivation, engagement and creativity is fascinating." The main objective of the association of independent enterprises from Germany, Italy, Ireland, the UK and the USA is the mutual development of new and improved heating elements and their global distribution. "Thanks to the cooperation within Eucopet and with our numerous supplier partners, we are virtually large. This is how we are perceived in the market and maintain our position in competition with the real big players in the industry. The reason we are so successful in doing this is because we maintain our speed of reaction and service orientation – typical advantages of smaller companies."



Loyalty to partners.

Otto Hofstetter AG has been relying on the heating elements of the Freek company for the last exactly 20 years. "It is indeed a special distinction when, after two decades, the feeling on both sides is that everything went well, that great projects were realised and that both companies prospered magnificently." Wolfgang Kaiser sees the reason for this in the loyalty that has characterised Freek ever since the takeover by the Kaiser family. "Loyalty is the basis for a successful cooperation in the spirit of a partnership. In this fast-moving, globalised world, it is particularly important to have good partners who trust and also stand by each other in harder times."

**"WHEN IT COMES TO
MINIATURISATION AND DURABILITY
OF HEATERS, WE ARE PROBABLY
THE WORLD LEADERS."**

Michael Ablas, authorised signatory

Efficiency in the smallest space.

In the meantime, around 100,000 heating elements have found their way from Sauerland to the mould manufacture in Uznach. These are HotMicroCoil nozzle heaters, the heart of which is an extremely easily formable heating tube that – with its external dimensions of at least 1 millimetre – is more likely to be identified by the uninitiated beholder as a fairly thick wire. Not only the heart but also the heating body "made by Freek" is special. The heating tape developed exclusively for Otto Hofstetter and their high-capacity PET moulds is trimmed for durability and energy-efficiency. Another heating element development with a unique selling proposition is Freek's patented thermoelastic heat conduction system with its versatile, advantageous and Freek-typical overwound slot. Equally well-thought-out is the simple-is-best design, unbeatable in terms of flexibility and price, in a simple yet highly precise reflection tube.

Good is not good enough.

"The heater which Otto Hofstetter AG has been using for many years reveals to be extremely reliable in daily operation", remarks Michael Ablas. He explains, furthermore, that the values for energy-efficiency and gentle use of resources are outstandingly good thanks to the compact and thermally well-thought-out design. "In the miniaturisation of heating systems and in durability, we are likely to play a leading, if

not the leading, role worldwide." He foresees little optimisation potential for a further development of the Otto Hofstetter nozzle heater: "It is a very mature product. On the one hand, we have optimised it all along and, on the other, the prerequisites have not changed decisively. Potential might exist in the applied materials." Seeing that energy-efficiency is currently at the top of the industry's priority list, the team researches in this area. "We carried out comparative tests with the heating used by Otto Hofstetter AG for its moulds. The results confirm its outstanding thermal properties, but at the same time provide ideas on how we might improve our solution in this context."

Best prospects for the future.

Those at Friedr. Freek GmbH feel that the relationship with the Swiss partner is one between friends. "If a mould of Otto Hofstetter AG runs anywhere in the world, nobody will automatically associate it with us. It is always our Swiss partner whose name is at stake." According to Michael Ablas, everyone at Freek is fully aware of this responsibility. Trust, loyalty and continuity should continue to characterise the cooperation. "If a bright idea comes up at Otto Hofstetter AG, we know that they will involve us in the implementation right from the start. This is important to us, because the confidence which has grown over many years forms the basis for a continued successful cooperation in future." Commenting on behalf of the entire Freek enterprise, Wolfgang Kaiser would like to see the cooperation continue for much longer than another 20 years.



Friedr. Freek GmbH

Sudetenstrasse 9, 58708 Menden/Sauerland, Germany

Founded in 1950

Employees: approx. 60

Sectors: plastics and packaging industry, medical and laboratory technology, air conditioning and commercial kitchen technology, solar and wind energy, aerospace technology and many more

Specialised in the development, manufacture and sale of electrical heating elements for industrial use