

Bamberger VEDAG GmbH: "Employees are the ones who make the difference."

"Our jobs are secure": New VEDAG Managing Director defies the crisis

Bamberg. At the start of the year 2009, a new Managing Director took up his post at the VEDAG GmbH in Bamberg. As his first official act, Michael Thomé had to immediately confront the international sales crisis – with success, as has now become apparent. Despite economic stagnation, the specialised company for the waterproofing of roof has been able to maintain its position among the market leaders in the industry and thus dispense entirely with job cutbacks. In this interview, Thomé talks about die economic crisis, VEDAG product development, improved working conditions for young mothers and the charm of the people in Bamberg.



Since 2009 in office: VEDAG Managing Director Michael Thomé. Source: Sybille Thomé

Mr Thomé, where does VEDAG stand now?

We currently employ an average of 240 persons in production, administration and sales, of which 140 are at the Bamberg location. We are a company which belongs to the Danish Icopal group, the largest manufacturer of bitumen membranes in the world and one of the leading producers of roofing materials in Europe. These are resources, particularly in the areas of technology, research and product systems, which none of our current competitor can fall back on.

How did you come to the Managing Director position at VEDAG?

You might say that it just happened of itself. I have always loved technology and the natural sciences, and via chemistry came to chemical engineering, in which I also received my degree. In

the companies in which I was active up until now, an increasing number of tasks in project management were added to functions in development and production, and ultimately positions in business management as well. I have worked in companies which created construction construction-related products for over 20 years. When the previous Managing Director, Georg Khevenhüller, offered me the position at VEDAG, the decision was very easily made.

What weapons are you using in the fight against the economic crisis?

A decisive step was that we have developed into a full-service provider for systems for waterproofing flat roofs. Today, “everything from a single source” has become a popular slogan, when the customer can easily lose the guiding thread among the variety of offers. With our new liquid waterproofing, we can now provide everything necessary for a flat roof. A further aspect was that we have not copied the market in terms of product development, so that we would have become interchangeable with others. Instead, we have set our own standards concerning quality, job safety und environmental compatibility. This path, one of creating innovative products, is a path that we will consistently follow.

Yet stepping into such a position in the midst of the current recession surely involves some difficulties?

At the moment, a great many firms are suffering under the crisis through no fault of their own, and the risk exists that we still haven't seen the worst of it. Our market as well has been hit hard by the crisis; that for roof surfaces recently declined again by ten percent. We ourselves took measures quite early on to prevent a slump in our business. That we are still in a very good position, despite all the problems, is due in large part to the hard work by the entire personnel. At the end of the day, a company is only an organisational form, in which real value is represented by the people that work in it. This is why it is therefore extremely important for me to constantly improve the working environment and chances for the future of our “VEDAGians”. Particularly now, companies must create security and confidence for employees just as much as for customers, as this is the basis for a genuine partnership. The most important thing, however, is our oldest product – tried and tested for 160 years – our service. Every employer knows that business is conducted from person to person, which is why this product will never disappear from our firm.

“Doing very well” – what does that mean concretely?

2009 is going well. We will meet all of our sales and earnings targets.

You want more security for your employees – do you mean employment security by this?

Yes, of course. Before I arrived, five positions in Frankfurt were cut, due to a company move. In this year, however, no further employees have been given notice. For next year, we plan to hire new employees in the areas of key account manager, product manager and field service. In this manner, we intend to expand our central service, in addition to the regional supervisors.

With what measures do you intend to concretely improve the working environment of VEDAG staff?

On the one hand, the fact is that I have often seen in the course of my career, how difficult it is for young mothers to re-enter professional life after maternity leave. Under normal conditions posed by the employer, they simply go to work with a newborn child at home. Some companies put real barriers in the way of these women den Frauen. I would like it to be different at VEDAG. We want to create flexible models, which makes allowances for how young parents live to a realistic extent and doesn't just put the conditions of the firm in the forefront – because these women want to work, and are highly motivated. It would be extremely foolish of us to renounce their performance. Furthermore, we still don't have uniform rules concerning flexible working hours at the moment. I would like to introduce these, but in such a way that they apply to all employees in a transparent and fair manner.

What advantages does the Bamberg location offer for you?

Its inhabitants. I'm truly a Franconian by conviction, although I actually come from Rhineland-Palatinate. But I have to say that the unbeatable advantage of Bamberg is the extremely high quality of life that this city offers. In my eyes, it is clearly higher than for example in Frankfurt! I simply like the people here for themselves; Franconians are simply extremely likeable. The city has flair and atmosphere, yet delightfully relaxing at the same time.



Michael Thomé in discussion with VEDAG staff. Source: Sybille Thomé

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Publication – with reference to the source – is free of charge, specimen copy requested