

Grinding out a bigger name

The Swiss-German-Austrian Winterthur Technology Group is set to increase its presence and profile in the UK as well as globally, as Andrew Allcock, reports

Winterthur Technology Group (WTG) is a grinding specialist; a manufacturer of wheels, dressers and latterly machine tools. Its UK headquarters are based in Sheffield, which is now the single consolidated UK location – bringing together Wendt, previously in Staplehurst, Kent, and Slipp Naxos Winterthur in Sheffield – and will be renamed Winterthur Technology UK this year (see box item page 48).

The Group itself is one of the three leading European manufacturers of bonded abrasive grinding wheels, claims its chief executive officer, Edmar Allitsch. It is the largest independent supplier of bonded abrasives in Europe, he adds, but its visibility in the UK does not reflect this status, he acknowledges.

The Group, formed in 1999, is now a combination of four brands – Winterthur (Switzerland), Rappold (Austria), Slipp Naxos (Sweden) and Wendt (Germany), which was acquired by the Group last

year, more or less doubling its size, although underlying organic growth is between 5-7 per cent. Wendt also brought a machine tool manufacturing aspect to the organisation, specifically carbide insert grinding machines. Indeed, WTG is now one of the two leading players in this area, it is claimed.

The organisation is some 1,500 employees strong worldwide, and had a turnover of £120 million last year (only half of 2007 included the Wendt acquisition). This also takes in a 40 per cent joint venture holding in Wendt India, the leading superabrasive supplier in that country.

WTG has aligned each brand to a type of product, so Wendt is the superabrasive brand in the group, even if the product is made by Winterthur. Slipp Naxos is the hot pressed wheel specialist – steel industry applications like hot slab grinding. Winterthur is the conventional vitrified bond abrasive brand, and

Rappold is the brand for cut-off wheels. “The brands no longer compete with each other, they are focused,” the CEO explains. So in the UK this means that the consolidated operation sees all eight salesmen selling the total portfolio.

DRIVE FOR INNOVATION

Innovation is the organisation’s driver, but with this focused in particular application areas through customised solutions, and where the aim is to be “best or second best” in each, the CEO adds. Those sectors take in automotive, aerospace, hardmetal/carbide cutting tool, steel, glass, wire, bearings, and optics. Automotive is 30 per cent of WTG’s sales, the carbide industry is perhaps 10-15 per cent, the steel industry 15-17 per cent and then the bearing industry, which like all others, is in single figure percentages of 4 per cent or below.

Within its customised, application-specific range, Mr Allitsch underlines that

there are some 200,000 product items, which comes as something of a shock: "This large number demonstrates how focused our solutions become when we work with our customers." Also he says that the organisation aims to have a third of these no older than three years. "We have quite a full product development pipeline," he offers, adding that the equivalent of 5 per cent of sales goes into WTG's R&D efforts.

The Group's ambition to grow at three times the rate of the market means taking market share from others in the grinding field or taking over applications not currently in the grinding field, such as machining. It also means becoming more global – 70 per cent of its sales are in Europe: "That has to grow," the CEO says, explaining this includes the newer EU countries as well as Asia, with recent successes in Japan and Korea, where there is a strong automotive element, highlighted.

With the purchase of Wendt, the Group immediately increased its presence in the US and Asia, while Wendt got better coverage in Eastern Europe. Plus there are complementary products within the four brands that supports product cross-selling, explains Mr Allitsch – WTG is a technology leader in conventional vitrified wheels and Wendt in diamond dressing wheels that are used to condition vitrified wheels, for example.

FULL PACKAGE SOLUTIONS

A further strength underlined is that with conventional wheels, superabrasives, dressing tools, and machine tools, Winterthur Technology Group is able to bring the "full package" to customers who have less time to investigate their own solutions. But in talking about customers, Mr Allitsch stresses that the end-users want a developed process; they don't buy a machine and a wheel separately, they buy the combination. So Winterthur Technology Group works with machine tool builders to develop such processes.

Examples of the Group's recent technological adventures include the



Crankshaft grinding – 30 per cent of WTG's sales come from the automotive sector

Nanowheel, a vitrified bond wheel where nanometric size particles are used in the bond. The benefit of this technology is that it reduces the risk of burning during grinding.

uWin is an open structure wheel for creepfeed applications that can be precisely controlled. Launched a year ago, it has been the most successful product launch, says Mr Allitsch, with sales valued at €1 billion. Benefits include reduced cycle times. In one gear grinding

application, a 50 sec cycle time became 32 sec – a 35 per cent improvement. The wheel also opens up new applications for WTG, says the CEO.

Coolgrind, a wheel with its own internal coolant chamber for through-wheel coolant, is already used on Wendt tool grinding machines. It requires no machine modification, the wheel's chamber is filled using the machine coolant nozzle. It uses less coolant but delivers what high pressure coolant would otherwise be required to achieve. Currently limited to 20 m/sec speeds, the target now is high speed applications, although foaming is a current issue.

The company's MACH disc wheel sees a carbon fibre material core with CBN coating. Aimed at plunge grinding of camshafts, it can run at 200 m/sec, as opposed to the current 125-140 m/sec, and it delivers better dampening than do steel cores and less contour deviation. It will be launched early next year.

WTG launched its Spectra carbide insert laser machining unit at GrindTec earlier this year. This is used to produce surface geometry such as chip breakers and K lands; basically, features that are difficult to grind. Another Wendt carbide tip grinding development is a 6-axis machine, going by the name of Spectra, which will offer new possibilities, it is offered. □

UK outlook for growth

Winterthur Technology UK's turnover is around £3 million, and managing director Chris Harford foresees a 10 per cent growth this year, with a stockholding of around £600,000 to support fast customer response. This is backed by a "huge" stockholding in Switzerland, which even allowing for modification if required, supports deliveries in days rather than weeks.

The glass industry is very important to the UK company, with edge profiling wheels cited in particular – reprofiling of these wheels is supported by the Sheffield operation. Glass optic grinding is another opportunity, as is the automotive industry in respect of windscreens and sidescreens.

The metalcutting side of the automotive industry, with WTG's superabrasives, is also highlighted as an opportunity – Ford at Dagenham is already a key customer – with gear grinding opportunities also mentioned.

With a combined sales team of eight (compared to three for Slip Naxos – plus five from Staplehurst), sales of standard vitrified wheel are expected to expand.