

PETplanet

insider

01.09.17

No.09
2017

MAGAZINE FOR BOTTLERS AND BOTTLE-MAKERS
IN THE AMERICAS, ASIA, EUROPE AND ALL AROUND THE PLANET

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is read in more than
140 countries

drinktec.com

September 11–15, 2017
Messe München, Germany

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Interview with Robert Schad, Chairman of Athena Automation

Working closely together with mould makers

by Alexander Büchler & Mike Urquhart



F.l.t.r.: Robert Schad, Chairman, Liz Schad, Member of the Board, Rob Sicilia, Business Manager PET, and Harold Luttmann, CEO



This 150t PET preform system serves as a Lightsout demonstration site for unattended moulding

PETplanet: Robert, how does your strategy set you apart from your competition?

Schad: First, we only build injection moulding machines and work with a variety of mould makers and auxiliary equipment suppliers. We focus on technology – a rigid base, a two-platen clamp with market-leading tie bar spacing, servo-driven pumps and ball screws for accuracy and energy efficiency.

Then we have pre-engineered options including PET, stack/cube, two material, robotics and integrated mould servo functions to provide significant advantages for different moulding applications. Also, we are customer focused. Athena operates without sales people. Instead, we build relationships through our regional technical support and by working with mould makers to ensure their moulds run optimally. With the machines now in production, we have learned so much that we can offer a 5 year parts and labor warranty and allow customers to buy parts directly from our suppliers.

PETplanet: What is unique about your new NIIGON line of PET preform machines?

Schad: Athena PET machines have the lowest cost of ownership from 2 to 192 cavities. With up to 6 stages of post mould cooling, we achieve industry leading cycle times while maintaining preform exit temperatures below 55°C to ensure the highest quality and get the lowest energy

consumption (0.21kWh/kg). We work with various mould makers, dryers and dehumidification suppliers to optimise customers' systems.

PETplanet: What feedback are you getting from your customers?

Schad: Both the customers and the mould makers we are working with have been very pleased. Some customers have already placed repeat orders. As part of our Lightsout development program, we are now supplying preforms to a local customer from our facility and have shipped over four million preforms in four different products and numerous colours without a single reject.

PETplanet: What are you doing to expand your customer support network?

Schad: There are now machines operating in 11 countries on 5 continents, and we have regional technical support in the USA, Canada, and Europe. Latin America is next.

PETplanet: What are you doing to ensure Athena will prosper post Robert Schad?

Schad: We have built a company and a facility capable today of building 300 machines per year and have land for expansion. Athena is a family-owned company with employee shareholders. We have a long-term outlook and are debt-free after an investment of \$150 million. Our management team is dedicated to carrying this vision

forward and growing the company. I welcome your readers to visit us and see for themselves that this is a very different company that offers unique advantages.

PETplanet: Robert what has been your greatest success? Your biggest failure?

Schad: My greatest success is Athena, and my biggest failure was following my major competitors' lead in setting up component manufacturing in-house, instead of focusing only on what we did best.

PETplanet: What do you see as the major trends affecting the preform (or moulding) industry in the next 10 years?

Schad: We see more diversification – customers tend to have their own preform designs requiring more flexibility – quicker mould and tooling changes – and smaller systems. There is also an increasing demand for automated operations that can run unattended. With improvements in communication – commonly referred to as Industry 4.0 – between machine, mould, hot runner controller, robot, and other auxiliary equipment there is no need to have one supplier for the entire system. The moulder will be able to take advantage of improvements from suppliers of each of these components to optimise their moulding system's performance.

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