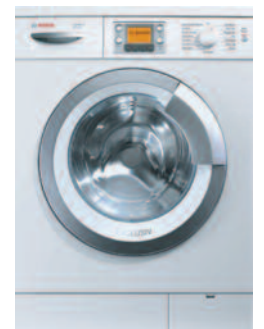




Door system for washing machine

SMALL CAP COMPANY WITH **A GLOBAL REACH**



Ehlebracht Plastics Technology, a division of Ehlebracht AG, is based in the German town of Enger, in North Rhine Westphalia. It produces technical and optical plastic components and systems for household and consumer products, the electrical and automotive industries and for kitchen furniture. Joseph Altham interviewed general manager, sales Heinrich Reuss, to find out about an innovative company with a global presence.

The customers of Ehlebracht Plastics Technology (Ehlebracht Kunststoff Technik) include Bosch und Siemens Hausgeräte (BSH), Bosch Power Tools, Miele, BOS and Automotive Lighting among many others. This means that the company makes components for, for example, the vacuum cleaners, washing machines, power tools, lawn and garden products,

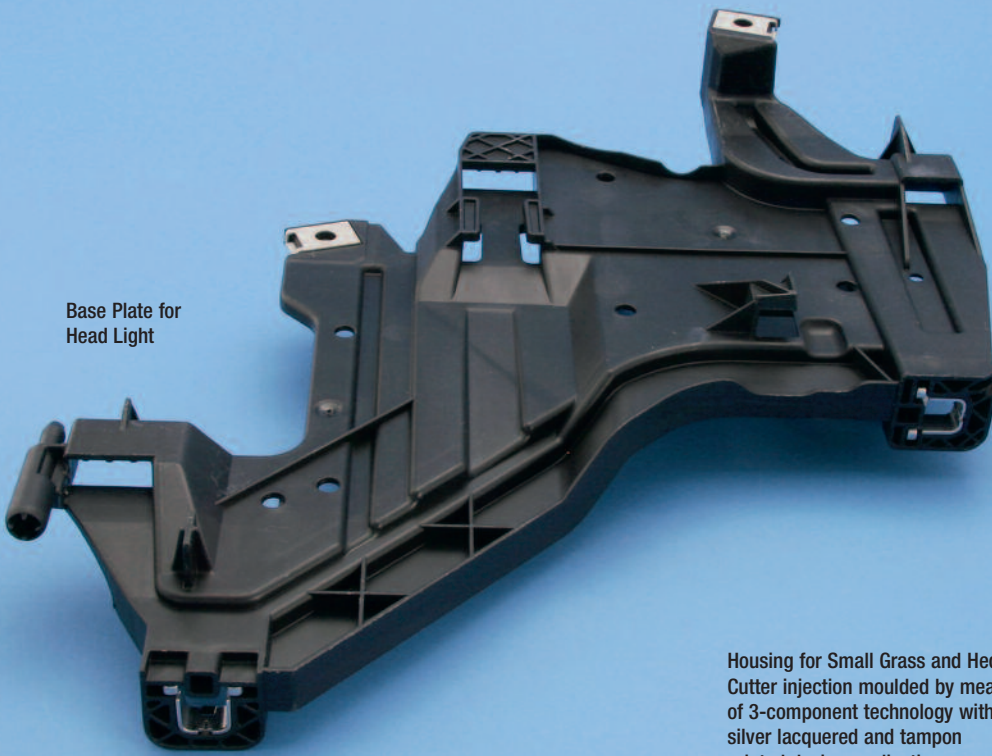
automotive headlights and office and kitchen furniture that can be found in department stores, garden centres or distributors all over Europe and abroad.

Heinrich Reuss explained that makers of white goods tend to externally source the production of their system components. "If you take manufacturers of household appliances as an example," he explained,

"typically, around 20 per cent of each unit will be produced in-house and they will outsource the other 80 per cent."

Capacity and competence

Ehlebracht Plastics Technology has almost 100 different injection moulding machines ranging from 30 up to 1300 tons in clamping force. The company's multi-com-



Base Plate for Head Light

Housing for Small Grass and Hedge Cutter injection moulded by means of 3-component technology with silver lacquered and tampon printed design applications



Handle for washing machine door with silver lacquered finish (2-part solution ultrasonically welded)

ponent injection moulding technology is used to make housings for products such as power tools and electric grass and hedge cutters, as well as for automotive interior components. Ehlebracht Plastics Technology has built up important long-term relationships and takes an individual and process-oriented approach to working with clients. The aim is to assist the customer through product co-development and through added value services throughout the supply process.

For the automotive industry, Ehlebracht Plastics Technology produces components for headlights such as base plates for the Audi A4 and housings for the Mercedes S-Class, for example. These have to be robust, of stable dimensions and capable of being very precisely positioned. The company has recently been working on the next generation Audi A4 base plate project as well as the Audi A5 head lens housings project.

For vacuum cleaners, the company makes both lacquered components and the grip elements. The grip element has to

be highly finished and to include electronic controls within the assembly. New projects the company is working on with its clients for these markets will lead to a more functional design integration, for example by making use of multi-component technologies for injection moulding of components.

Complete solution

Complete washing machine doors are one of the company's major products. "We manufacture and assemble washing machine doors and deliver the complete door system direct to the manufacturer's production line," explains Heinrich Reuss. "We source the door components – the door glass, the locking system and the hinges etc – and produce the injection moulded parts ourselves. We have responsibility for full quality control – all the customer has to do is to fit the completely assembled door systems on their lines."

The handles for these doors are among Ehlebracht's most complex achievements. These are produced for example in tandem moulds. "Thanks to our one-shot process

and by integrating the automated assembly processes via ultrasonic welding technology by KLN Ultraschall AG and assembly solutions by ASL Automation, we have been able to produce handles with specific design as set by the OEM and a high-gloss white or silver-lacquered finish that was simply not possible before. Two different parts, the technical part and the design part, are moulded together in one shot and then - being positioned onto each other - ultrasonically welded," says Heinrich Reuss. "The open and close function has to be totally efficient and reliable because the washing machine cannot start unless the door is properly shut. The handle must therefore have the necessary torsional stiffness and strength to work efficiently and keep on working throughout years of operation, while, at the same time, harmonising in its design with the aesthetics of the complete machine. We have been able to realise all these positive achievements for our customer by constantly striving for excellence in developing such solutions jointly with the customer's >

development team and our strong network partners such as KLN Ultraschall AG and ASL Automation supporting the development process towards serial production by its tailor-made solutions.”

Expanding abroad

In 2008 the non-consolidated turnover of Ehlebracht Plastics Technology was €43.8 million, a rise of almost one third from the 2006 figure of €29.6 million. In addition to its production site in Enger, the company has a factory in Berlin but operations outside Germany are also playing an increasingly important part in its continuing growth. Since 1995 Ehlebracht has been producing thermo-plastic components in Slovakia, from a plant at Michalovce, and its most recent expansion came with the opening in 2005 of a factory in Shenzhen, in southern China.

The Michalovce factory supplies components to BSH's plant in Slovakia and is also ideally positioned to supply the Bosch Power Tools plant for their Green Line Products, just across the border in Hungary. Recent new investments in injection moulding machinery are also targeted at the application market of carrying-cases for power tools.

“In Michalovce, we set up the multi-component technology for power tools and hedge cutter housings in 2006,” said Mr Reuss, “and this investment has already led to a significant increase in turnover from new businesses at the plant. In 2008/2009 alone we have invested more than €3m in our plants in Germany, Slovakia and China, installing new machines, new technologies, relocating our non-German plants in bigger and better premises and setting up a tool shop at the Shenzhen, China operations. Furthermore, the company is currently set-

ting up a second plant in Suzhou, China, expected to be ready for production by year-end 2010.”

The plant at Shenzhen in China, now under the sole ownership of Ehlebracht, currently employs approximately 450 people.

Fitting the bill

In China, Ehlebracht Plastics Technology works in close cooperation with BSH. “In 2006 we started to produce and deliver complete washing machine door systems for BSH in Germany,” explains Mr Reuss. “Having proved our capabilities, we were then asked by BSH to set up an operation at our Shenzhen factory together with a shop-in-shop assembly line at the customer's production site in Nanjing to supply similar systems and components directly to their production line. In 2009 and 2010 Ehlebracht Berlin has again gained

Lacquered components for vacuum cleaners





significant new projects for similar applications with its client. Key to this success was our track record with BSH for operational excellence, on-time delivery, quality control and closeness to the customer."

Another strong supporting factor certainly is to be able as a company to closely collaborate with network partners during the project set up phase for serial production to bring to life products on time with the right quality and cost. These are for example engineering houses, tool makers or manufacturers of special purpose machineries such as ASL Automation and KLN Ultraschall, both with whom Ehlebracht Plastics Technology fosters a long term business relationship for project support.

Ehlebracht is finding that this experience of working closely with European-based OEMs, both through the customers' European and Asian production plants, is attracting great interest from new potential customers, as Heinrich Reuss explains.

"There are many companies that want to work with a supplier that has the quick responses and individualised service of a

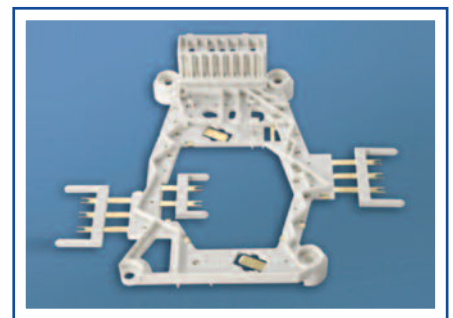
small- or medium-sized enterprise but that also has a global reach. They are looking for companies that combine a strong German-based management team with proven implementation skills in local markets and the ability to maintain quality levels that match those of the customers' own brands."

"We think that Ehlebracht Plastics Technology fits that bill precisely. Despite the economic downturn in 2009 but thanks to the industry and customer mix of Ehlebracht Plastics Technology and the start of several new businesses turnover of €41,3 million dropped by a comparatively moderate six percent versus 2008 while – provided economic rebound to continue – the companies prospects for 2010 and beyond seem promising. We are progressing quite well and continue to fill the Ehlebracht Plastics Technology pipeline with new projects, from which we expect further growth and a good proportion of turnover from young product applications over the next years." □

www.ehlebracht-plastics-technology.com
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Housing with pre-assembly for automotive headlights



Electro-mechanical switch for universal motors, overmoulded

Hedge Cutter Housing

