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By offering the full value chain for heat exchangers under one roof, this company has seen tremendous growth over the past three years.

Bringing the Heat

In only three years, GEA PHE Systems North America, a division of the German-based GEA Group, has made itself a major player in the North American heat exchanger market. By keeping all the processes for the production and sale of its heat exchanger products under one roof, Lutz Wolf, president and CEO, said he expects the company to continue to increase its marketshare and experience double-digit growth in the coming years.

"We have the full value chain under one roof, from engineering and sales to customer service and production," said Wolf. "We are pretty much self sufficient here, producing and selling 100% American-made products."



In 2007, three smaller heat exchanger companies were merged and became GEA PHE Systems North America based in York, Penn. "Those smaller operations focused mainly on sales and some smaller customizing of units," said Wolf. "There wasn't really a full-blown operation, so what GEA did was put out a strategic plan for the American market. We had to change our approach from being a small company without a significant market footprint to one that could secure a significant part of the American market."

The company made a major investment in the American market, building a 250,000-square-foot facility in York. "We equipped the plant with state-of-the-art presses, vacuum furnaces, and test equipment for the production process," Wolf said. "We went live, piece by piece over three phases, with the first phase beginning in May 2007, and the last phase being completed in spring 2008."

More to offer

"Compared with our competitors in the US market, we certainly offer the most advanced product range, all manufactured in North America," Wolf said. "We can also service the full range of plate heat exchangers out of one location."

When Wolf started at the company three years ago, it had about 30 employees. Today, there are more than 125. "This operation does not hesitate to compete with the companies that are considered to be the market leaders," he said. "Our growth over the past few years is definitely significant."

Wolf said there are no plans to slow that growth. The company recently added two new presses to its brazed plate heat exchanger business.

"This is a sign that what GEA is doing is a bold, long-term approach," he said. "It is a clear message to our customers and partners that we will act pragmatically with good ideas and good, efficient products."

The goal is to have continued double-digit growth over the next several years, Wolf said. In



Lutz Wolf,
president and CEO

addition to increasing its marketshare, he said the company should also see increased revenues as a result of its move to an almost entirely American supply chain.

"The vast majority of material we use for production is ordered or purchased from American partners," said Wolf. "When we first started with some new product lines, we used the same suppliers as our sister company in Europe, so we had to import a lot of our materials. Over the past year, we have turned this around and are purchasing from good American suppliers, and our lead times and transportation costs are down."

The company also deals with a number of vendors who supplied the York plant before it came under the GEA umbrella. "We have some suppliers in the York area we have been doing business with for more than 10 years that we have good relationships with," Wolf said.

GEA is undertaking a major marketing initiative this spring. "If you want to grow, you have to get your name out in the market and prove your products are state of the art and can compete with other companies' products," he said.

The company offers a full range of gasketed, fully welded, and brazed plate heat exchangers. A heat exchanger is a vessel used to transfer heat from one medium to another without allowing the respective media (fluids or gasses) to become cross-contaminated. A plate heat exchanger consists of a series of corrugated plates. Compressed within a frame structure or brazed together, the plates form an arrangement of parallel flow channels, where one of the media flows in the odd channel and the other media flows in the even channel.

The many advantages of the plate heat exchanger technology lie in their plate corrugation patterns. The heat exchanger's corrugated surface enhances turbulence, for maximum heat transfer efficiency. Corrugations enhance the surface area between the two media as well as lend strength to the plates. Each manufacturer has its own unique corrugation-pattern designs, and the design of each pattern varies according to the requirements of each application.

The heat transfer efficiency of the plate also relies on the even flow of media over the entire area. This frequently requires a special area near the port designed to distribute the entire heat transfer surface area. Because liquid media take the path of least resistance, the distribution area ensures full use of the heat transfer surface area by spreading the media evenly across the face of the plate.

Right people in the right places


To the 125 workers at its York plant, the company employs other people at a facility outside Toronto. Several salespeople work remotely. "You can buy the best machines and equipment, but if you don't have a committed and experienced team that's willing to work together, it's worth nothing," Wolf said.

Although prospective employees must show expertise in their respective fields, Wolf said there is a heavy emphasis on social competencies during the interview process. "Whether a person makes it through the hiring process depends a lot on integrity, potential for teamwork, and how stressful situations are handled," he said.

The company typically hires salespeople, engineers with backgrounds in heat transfer and degrees in mechanical or chemical engineering, and certified welders for production. "We have a lot of welder positions, and we hire people who are high quality and have ASME certification, which is a quality standard that is required in all our locations," Wolf said. ✨


—Adam Swift





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