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Where and when needed

Walter Ebeling, director of Pan Mixers South Africa, says the company has reached a point where they can meet most manufacturers' requirements for concrete plant and equipment. They have in-house manufacturing, design, hydraulic, electric, electronic and programming expertise. *Wilhelm du Plessis* spoke to him about this and the self-loading concrete mixers that they introduced to the local market last year.

Walter Ebeling.

Sketch the background of the company – has your offering changed?

Pan Mixers South Africa (PMSA) was started in 1976 by my father. It was located on rented premises in Sebenza. In the early 80s he bought the current premises in Jet Park and built the first factory. In the mid-80s he purchased the property next door and built the second factory. When he retired in the mid-90s he left control of the business to myself and my brother. I am involved in marketing and sales and Robert is involved in manufacturing and production.

The business started as manufacturers of counter-current pan mixers which are specialised mixers that mix concrete very intensively and also machines to make concrete blocks, bricks and paving.

With all small business, the business started off labour intensively. Since the mid-90s we have invested in high technology machinery. We have our own machine shops and manufacture all our own components on CNC machines. This has led to a dramatic increase in the quality of the products that we manufacture.

From the early 2000s we began to represent other type products – for instance planetary pan mixers which are good for ready mixed concrete as opposed to our mixers which are for smaller aggregate sizes and specialised concrete mixing. We then began representing a company that makes microwave moisture sensors – Franz Ludwig – because controlling moisture is very important in the making of high quality concrete.

From then on we slowly started representing yet more companies: Rettenmeier (manufacturers of production boards for block making), and Leyde chemicals. They make a whole range of products, but we use their products for the concrete industry as it prevents concrete from sticking to components and products that remove concrete that has set to components.

We also represent BFS Casagrande which specialises in the manufacture of vertical pipe making machinery and Wil El Mil that makes presses to make kerb stones and concrete slabs.

What is the purpose of this offering?

All these manufacturers and their products are related to concrete which is our core customer base. We started with brick and block, paving and mixing machines and machines that produce concrete for specialised products and have extended our footprint into the concrete industry. When a customer wants to enter the concrete industry there is a very good likelihood that we can supply a tailor-made solution.

How many people do you employ?

We employ 110 people who are all based in Jet Park. "We are in the process of building a new store of 400 m^2 which will centralise all our parts. We are also building a 500 m^2 office block. This will give us more expansion potential as we will be employing more sales staff for the various products that they represent.

Do you want to expand?

We are happy with the production capacity we have at the moment, but are looking at options to expand this to make ourselves more cost effective. We represent 13 international companies now and I want to do these companies justice by dedicating more sales staff to each of these product lines instead of having our sales staff represent many products.

In which markets are PMSA products sold?

PMSA's products are sold all over the world but we have found that in the last nine years we have tended to supply the majority of our machinery throughout Africa. The largest market is Southern Africa (70%) and then the rest of Africa. We have machines in Ghana, Cameroon, and the DRC while we also have machines in Ireland, Russia, and China. Some of our mixing and batching plants are being used in Australia and America.

Do you have in-house design capability?

Yes, our design capability is all in-house. We develop new technologies for our machines – mainly for bricks, blocks and mixing. The problem with outsourcing this capability is that such knowledge is then more easily accessible in the industry.

Our auto CAD department, therefore develops the machines in-house. We do occasionally bring in contractors who have experience in these developments and assist us in the design – but the latter is done by us. The in-house design is not only in CAD. We also do our own automation, and are not dependent on others to develop software programmes.

As these systems have evolved, customers require a higher level of reporting and, as such, our staff is qualified in Wonderware SCADA management systems. We sell SCADA packages, but we develop the software ourselves. This package is then customised to suit the client's individual needs.

Why did you start representing the Italian manufacturer Fiori in July last year?

We saw the need for it: to provide a traditional mixing and batching plant is expensive. Site establishment costs are high in greenfield operations, especially in places that are far from companies that supply ready mixed concrete or away from established infrastructure, so you need a whole array of equipment just to set up a semi-permanent batching plant. We therefore started to represent Fiori's self loading concrete mixers last year. They make various machines, including dumpers and large concrete mixers.

Fiori mixers mix very high quality concrete which one will not normally associate with a self loading mixer. The drum has been specially designed so there is no segregation in the concrete. The mixers are also supplied with an optional weighing system.

The operator drives the bucket into the stockpile – like a TLB – so, instead of six or more people operating a manual weighing and mixing system, you literally have a driver and possibly two people to load cement. The rest of the operation is done by machines.

The Fiori also removes the necessity for a dumper: the truck mixes the concrete and takes it to where you need it. The model that we have on display on our premises has a capacity of 4 m^3: it has a four wheel drive system with three different steering mechanisms. The first is front wheel steer, the second is pinch steer mode, which means that the wheels turn into each other and the third is a crab steer mode, where the wheels all point in the same direction. It is very easy to change between these steering modes and they are ideal for operation on a construction site and placing the concrete exactly where it is needed by driving slowly along a foundation while filling it with concrete, all that is then required is vibration and levelling.

The 4 m^3 model can batch up to 16 m^3 of concrete an hour and costs R866 000 excluding VAT and delivery – which is very competitive. In South Africa the Fiori principle is relatively new, but it is not new in the rest of the world.