

Passing the place-name signs, we learn Westerstede is a “staatlich anerkannter Erholungsort”, a state acknowledged health resort. The village housing Thermocolor is known for its good, healthy atmosphere.



The atmosphere at Thermocolor is at least as good. We are welcomed with a bright “moin”, which literally means “good morning”, although they say it all day in this part of Germany. Thermocolor is located in the north of the country, between Bremen and the Dutch border, not exactly a traditional textile area. Thermocolor is different, general manager Mr Friedhelm Lübbers smiles: “In order to be competitive these days, we have to be. We stand out with unusual fabrics, colours, designs. So why not with an unusual location?”

Thermocolor was established in 1975, as a transfer paper printer. Some fifteen years ago, it also started printing fabrics.

“If we want to be flexible, it is important to perform as many activities as possible ourselves”, Mr Lübbers explains. For the same reason, Thermocolor, which used to also print on commission, now focuses exclusively on its own collection. “The only way to keep production completely in our own hands.” Thermocolor produces 8 to 10 million metres of fabric and transfer paper a year. Fashion fabrics, mainly for major German, Belgian, French and UK manufacturers, and home textiles, for which Thermocolor also has quite some customers overseas.

Medium-sized and flexible

We start our company tour at the design department, which is housed in a part newly built in 1999. The lawns around the building offer plenty of space for further expansion. Mr Lübbers thinks Thermocolor won't be using it for the time being: “These days it's smarter to be medium-sized and flexible.”

Talking about the advantages of being medium-sized and flexible, we arrive at the recently purchased IPS delta dispensing system. It's standing in brotherly fashion next to an IPS 2000, which still seems to be

in perfect shape, although maybe twenty to thirty years old already. One glance at the machines, however, reveals their differences immediately. The IPS is far more compact. “We bought it last year, mainly because we knew support on the IPS 2000's operating system was to end in 2005, and we didn't want to take the risk. On the other hand, we were planning on coming up with a new colour book, so the timing was excellent.” In order to give Thermocolor the flexibility on which it prides itself so much, it became an IPS delta with “specials”. “Normally, an IPS delta is suitable for producing quantities of ten to a hundred kilos a colour”, Mr Lübbers explains. “However, because of the short run lengths we produce, we often need smaller quantities. Therefore, Stork engineers made some changes on the mixer, and came up with a different bucket type. Thus, making it possible to print quantities as small as four and a half kilos, which allows us to offer our customers run lengths as short as 350 metres per colourway.”

Extremely short delivery times

“This is really essential to us, since we operate in niche markets. Our flexibility is our strength; delivering short run lengths in extremely short delivery times.”

We ask Mr Lübbers what he means by extremely short. “We are able to produce samples in less than a week and make production deliveries in

“If worse comes to worst, we can shorten the entire production process to less than two weeks after delivery of the art-work.”

another week. So if worse comes to worst, and of course upon immediate decision on the sample by the customer, we can shorten the entire production process to less than two weeks after delivery of the art-work.” That's short.

A highly creative solution

“We can't compete on price, that's obvious. We can however compete on speed and flexibility. Therefore we have to think differently, be creative. We ourselves, but also our partners. In this case, the cooperation between our technical people and Stork's specialists resulted in a highly creative solution. In order to enable the IPS delta to handle the new bucket type, for example, Stork adjusted

the number of valves in the dosing system. Instead of the usual 32 valves, our system only has twenty. In our case, producing small quantities is far more important than being

able to produce 32 colours.” Mr Lübbers gives us another example of this kind of creativity: “We use production software especially designed for our organization. A management information system that controls our entire operation. Instead of introducing a parallel operating system, Stork has managed to make our existing software compatible with our new dispensing system.”

“We believe in a good future for European textile printers,” Mr Lübbers concludes, “provided that they focus on flexibility and creativity.”

Our visit to Westerstede made one thing more than clear: Thermocolor doesn't mind setting the example...

MANAGEMENT BUY-OUT OF STORK'S DISPENSING ACTIVITIES

Last month, the Stork Prints Group announced a management buy-out of its dispensing activities. The sale is in line with the group's strategy of strengthening the focus in its activities. The new company, GSE B.V., is taking over all existing dispensing activities and work in progress agreements, as well as all staff directly involved. Stork Prints will act as agent for GSE's dispensing products in the textile printing market, making use of its global distribution network.

Mr Anne Lourens, Mr Henk Hummelink and Mr Maarten Hummelien, involved with the business since its inception with Stork Prints, are sharing ownership of the new company and are determined that existing customers should experience no interruptions to service or product supply. “We are very committed to furthering the growth of this business and plan to expand and develop the existing range of products and services”, says Mr Lourens, GSE's new managing director.



THERMOCOLOR

Thermocolor, part of the Daun and Cie Group, recently purchased an IPS delta dispensing system with “specials”. General manager Friedhelm Lübbers explains how some slight alterations in the IPS delta's original design gave Thermocolor the flexibility on which it prides itself so much.



FLEXIBILITY THROUGH CREATIVITY

