

Niche player for 1 to 1,000,000 pieces

Louwers Glass and Ceramic Technologies in the southern Dutch town of Hapert is an out and out niche player. The company supplies glass and ceramic components to OEMs in the high-tech industry, delivering anything from a single piece to one million identical parts, tailor-made with tolerances of less than one micron. 'We use many different techniques to process technical glass and ceramics, including binding materials such as glass and metal. That gives us a unique position in the European market,' says general manager Eduard Biekens. 'And we want to continue expanding in the coming years.'

by Jos Cortenaar

Like many companies in the south, Louwers began in the 1960s, at a stone's throw from Philips, which was rapidly growing at that time, and has remained a supplier to almost every division of the electronics giant since. 'Such as Lighting, Semiconductors and Medical Systems,' says Biekens, who has been running the company for several years. 'But we have also looked to other markets in the almost fifty years we have been in operation, in the same way as we are currently looking outside this region for chances and opportunities. We already have representatives in Germany and Belgium and we are also looking at countries like France and the UK.'

Open innovation and expertise

Biekens, however, does not disqualify the Eindhoven region. 'This industrial environment is substantial. Innovative companies, knowledge institutes, schools, leading businesses – it has everything. We have more and more projects with other companies and share equipment and knowledge wherever possible. We use

organisations like Syntens and TNO to carry out analyses and tests that we can't do ourselves. Open innovation is the future. We're not thinking of leaving, but in order to remain on top, you have to look beyond borders, recognise trends and respond to them.'

A trend is the continuous demand for expertise, which, at Louwers, is an unusual story. 'High-tech or not, we still need high-quality glass blowers. Many clients require unique products, part of which we make by hand. The only national training institute in this field is in Leiden, which is why we have outlined a certified training programme in association with them. This guarantees us well-educated personnel.'

Streamlining and automation

Parallel with the desire for expertise are automation and lean manufacturing. 'Despite being a niche player, we still have competition, especially for larger batches of several hundred thousand to one million products and particularly in the analytical and lighting markets. We have streamlined and automated our production processes in such a way that we can successfully compete with Eastern European countries and even China, in terms of both quality and cost price.'

Whether the batches are large or small, Louwers characterises itself in the market with its quality. 'We target OEMs with which we can develop new products. Our R&D teams like to meet clients as early as possible to boost the chance of developing a manufacturable design. We prototype, invest in and supply complex products. That is also a trend: OEMs seeking partnerships. Early supplier involvement and service level agreements (SLAs) are contemporary standards, and are something we want to be involved in, provided that they lead to long-term contracts.'

Internationalisation

Louwers purchases its semi-manufactured technical ceramic and glass from manufacturers in countries including the US, Germany and South Korea. 'Because we supply products to demanding OEMs, we only purchase products that meet the highest standards.' Louwers Glass and Ceramic Technologies has



Eduard Biekens invests in facilities that meet the highest possible requirements.
Photo: Bart van Overbeeke

seen stable turnover growth of eight to ten percent over the last ten years. The workforce has grown more slowly, now totalling 65. In addition to buyers in the semiconductor, lighting, medical technology and optical industries, Louwers has clients in biotechnology, telecoms, the (petro)chemical industry, optoelectronics, energy and analytical equipment. All of these are growth markets in both the Netherlands and abroad. 'We are firmly focused on internationalisation. There are enough opportunities and constant, manageable growth remains the key.'

Vacuum connectivity

Every year, Louwers invests significantly in technology and innovation, with the latest being the production of ultra-high vacuum feedthroughs and connectors, which are being used increasingly by semiconductor and optoelectronics manufacturers. 'We make applications with which our clients can operate their systems in an ultra-high vacuum environment, which is a pre-requisite for them given that, for example, the wavelengths or electron bundles used are absorbed by air. However, it is still necessary to use in-going and out-going electrical signals with these very complex systems and our feedthroughs and connectors make this possible. We work closely with OEMs in the semiconductor and optoelectronic markets, where many unique and challenging projects are currently underway.' ●

links

www.louwers.nl