

Why smaller is sometimes better



Prodim's Freddy Franceus says that technical know-how and service are key when serving niche markets

By David Sear

Here's a simple question: what does it take to become a distributor of choice? Extensive stocks? Rock-bottom prices? A large inside sales team? Well such factors can work well in some circumstances, but at Prodim Industrial Valves & Automation in Belgium the management team have definitely carved out a different route to success. Managing Director Freddy Franceus explains more: "It is simply not our plan to be a one-stop-shop holding every single valve item that might be needed by the process industries throughout Belgium. Our strategy is much more focussed, namely to help customers who have demanding applications that need specific valves, and in particular actuated valves."

Stocks kept in the warehouse therefore include a small yet dedicated range of valves, actuators and accessories which are regularly needed by the customer base. There's also a storage rack containing numerous mounting brackets and bushes. "We don't just sell individual items; rather we fit and then test actuated valves to deliver

complete, ready to use flow control systems to our customers," says Mr. Franceus.

Nor is a large number of staff needed to deliver service, he continues. Quite the opposite, it seems. "Larger organisations can be hampered because decisions may have to be channelled through existing protocols and be approved by various departments. Smaller organisations tend to be more flexible and responsive. What is important I believe is having a high level of valve knowledge. Front-line staff should therefore have an extensive background in industry so that they can advise clients based on genuine experience of the products and the applications. I would say that the need for valve expertise is becoming even more important as end users cut back their own technical staff and subcontract out project work."

Asked if he could back up that claim, Mr. Franceus quickly recounts two orders for pneumatically-actuated valves. "The first request came from an engineering company yet when we reviewed the specifications we immediately realised that the final customer normally requires filter regulators on his pneumatic actuators. We passed that information back to the engineering company who were able to review and update the paperwork in good time."

The second example provided by Mr. Franceus is equally compelling. "Our engineer who reviewed the quotation request for a pneumatically-operated valve immediately spotted something that had been overlooked by the engineering company: namely that the site did not have a compressed air facility. The client therefore quickly accepted our recommendation to replace the pneumatic actuator with an electro-hydraulic model!"

Strong relationships up and down the supply chain are also essential for niche suppliers, continues Mr. Franceus. "Take a current order for two DN1600 valves and actuators which a local client needs most urgently. Now valve bodies of that size are cast to order and so can take weeks or even months to obtain. Fortunately one of our preferred suppliers was able and willing to keep his own foundry open during the Christmas period to help serve this customer. Of course there is a cost factor involved but the customer is willing to pay it because it means he can keep his facility up and running." Summing up our pleasant interview, Mr. Franceus reiterates his vision for valve supply. "I am quite convinced that the future will be formed around strong valve manufacturers who work closely with knowledgeable, local distributors, whereby smaller, highly knowledgeable companies will be responsible for meeting customers' needs for high end, technical valve solutions."

Freddy Franceus in Profile

Age: 49

Education: Studied electromechanical engineering at technical college

Career: started in the valve industry in 1991. Worked as sales engineer / product manager for three leading valve manufacturers before joining Prodim in 2006. He acquired Prodim in 2009

Hobbies: enjoys playing tennis and golf with friends

Family: married with five children, Mr. Franceus likes to spend time with family in his second home in the Medoc region of France.

