

GUTS!



Link interviews entrepreneurs. Interviewees are people with a great corporate performance, almost always in sharply defined, highly competitive b-to-b-markets. They innovate continuously, are persistent, industrious, have a strong bond with their clients and are proud of their products and staff. And above all: they have guts.

Some years ago ASML transferred production of a number of modules from Eindhoven to the US. 'We're losing business', Marcel Figge of Sentech heard companies around him complain. 'I immediately bought a ticket and went to ASML in the USA. They were overjoyed, because they still needed our sensors, of course.' The same thing happened after the transfer of a module from Switzerland to Taiwan.' Figge became an entrepreneur almost by accident, but now that he is, he is unstoppable.

Marcel Figge, director of Sentech Sensor Technology in Nieuwkuijk

'THIS WILL BE ALL OR NOTHING, I THOUGHT'

by Lucy Holl

On one of the walls of the fresh looking building at Nieuwkuijk near Den Bosch hangs a framed congratulation by ASML for Sentech's ten year anniversary in 2010. Sentech Sensor Technology had Figge, his wife and one employee on the payroll when OEM ASML became a customer. At present a staff of twelve generates a turnover of seven million Euros a year. Sentech produces specialised sensor solutions. The

company advises, develops, assembles, integrates and above all provides applications for agro technology, the semiconductor industry, the transport sector and the equipment industry.

Before he started on his own account, Figge worked as an account manager at Honeywell. Around 2000 this company sold two product lines to Pepperl+Fuchs. The new owner immediately declared the lines obsolete. Customers however were not satisfied with the alternatives provided by Pepperl+Fuchs

and asked Figge whether he could continue supply from the 'obsolete' lines. 'It was the last Friday in the second quarter of 2000. This will be all or nothing, I thought. I put the phone down and said to my wife: 'We start for ourselves.' She is a go-getter just like me. Sometimes this drives us nuts, to be honest. It is immediately full throttle. Next Monday I established the company, on Tuesday I visited a Swiss supplier and on Wednesday I visited customers. I think in opportunities, I am extremely solution oriented. Nine out of ten people stay too long in the 'should do' phase.'

And where did you find money? 'Through 'aunt Agaath', a Dutch fiscal possibility that makes it attractive for family to lend money for such an initiative. With large customers I immediately agreed a payment period of thirty days and with suppliers of ninety days. Give me the room to make this happen, I said to them. Suppliers knew of the orders so they knew the cash flow would be in order. When I started in 2000 the economy was top, seven months later the market collapsed. But we were of course extremely lean. My wife was responsible for financial affairs, an employee for logistics and I took on contacts with customers and suppliers.'

What picture did you have in mind?

'That of America. Sensor matters are trusted to specialists who advise which product and make fits the application. Major players like ASML, FEI and Assembléon came to us because they simply needed their old products. After that we were asked to assemble. We chose for sensor selection and integration at the client's, with the necessary logistic trajectory. This is by far the largest success of our



Sentech has a strong process focus. Sensor assembly is partly done in-house. Photo: 'Bureau Lorient Communicatie'



Entrepreneur Marcel Figge: 'The difference between a good and a not so good company can always be explained by people's commitment.' Photo: Bureau Lorient Communicatie

company. Customers should focus on their core competences. We take care of their sensor matters and act as an extension piece for their R&D. It shortens their run time. We just opened an office at the High Tech Campus Eindhoven to be even closer to our customers and to suppliers of our customers like Frencken and Nebato.'

You started sort of by coincidence, you broadened in response to customer demand? 'Sales is done by the ears. It is a matter of listening, hearing the buzz. This brainwave of a sensor integration company I already had when I visited customers on behalf of Honeywell.'

Do others copy your approach? 'In my opinion no other Dutch company approaches sensor integration the way we do. In Europe Omron and Siemens have sites, mainly sales organisations unable to assemble something just like that. Especially for existing organisations it proves hard to break out of existing frameworks. Why doesn't Ouwehand import fresh tilapia from Vietnam? Because in

their mindset fish is something in a jar.'

Twelve employees and seven million turnover: efficiency first? 'We have a strong process focus. Sensor assembly is partly done in-house, but also by people who work at home.

'Nine out of ten people stay too long in the 'should do' phase'

These are highly educated retired people, formerly active at our clients. We have provided them with good workshops. Instructions and test forms are on the internet. We comply with strict automotive quality and traceability standards. A lot of people don't want to stop a 65.'

What kind of manager are you? 'I feel more like a colleague with responsibility in the end. Bosses often are an impeding factor for the

development of their employees. I'm convinced that people should be given room to develop themselves.'

The jury of the Brabant Best Entrepreneurial Vision Trophy (BOV) called you the soul of the company. 'I am the face, I talk to customers and suppliers, search for solutions, provide manufacturers with directions. My strong points lie in connecting people and the mix of know how and market knowledge. It is pleasant for customers that the person at their table can decide immediately. 'This is the idea, we go for it and a yes is a yes.'

What got you a place in the finals and the BOV trophy? 'The theme was collaboration with the customer. 'Can you tell us about that?', the jury asked during their visit. I asked a customer and let him tell it. The jury liked that. The host asked me to name something I am good at. I said: knowing what I'm not good at and leaving that to others.'

The company largely depends on you? 'Yes, maybe, but I also leave a lot to colleagues. At the moment bureau Theseus Advies BV helps us define our strategy for the next five years. We are not very visible to the market. We would like to create a sales organisation. There still is a lot of potential in the market. Many companies struggle with the same problems. A lot of customers are unaware of the hidden costs in their organisation. When you buy a sensor for € 17, it might cost € 30 to integrate it into the end product. We aim at providing the solution at say € 25.'

How can you keep it up? 'I have an above average drive. The difference between a good and a not so good company can always be explained by people's commitment. We have an rfid project where the customer's products are exposed to strong UV-light. The solution seemed impossible, but we go for it anyway. In a Philips Ultra Fast Scanner project we also often said: 'This might be impossible.' The

number of development hours together with partners became a multitude of what was calculated, but we found the solution for the customer. No fuss about money.' ●

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