

Alexander Wilden, owner and CEO of the schwartz Group, makes no distinction between work and life. "Work is part of life," he affirms.



A consuming passion for heat treatment

How Alexander Wilden, Owner and CEO of the schwartz Group, has conquered three global markets with heat treatment systems.

BY ANJA NOLTE

When Alexander Wilden is asked how the schwartz Group became the global market leader, he replies: "If you want to be something today, you have to want it above all else, you have to be passionate about it." He first joined the mechanical engineering company in Simmerath over 20 years ago as Commercial Manager and Authorized Sig-

natory. He went on to become CEO in 2011 and sole owner of the schwartz Group since 2016 – with ten locations and 270 employees worldwide. "schwartz was already manufacturing heat treatment systems for various markets back then," reports Wilden. The company then placed a clear focus on the automotive industry and dedicated itself to solutions for lightweight automotive engineering. In 2016, the schwartz Group was officially confirmed as the global

market leader in the field of heat treatment systems for press hardening for the first time by the independent World Market Leader Index.

schwartz built the first roller hearth furnace for press hardening around 30 years ago, and today over 400 of these heat treatment systems have been installed worldwide. "One system can handle up to three million car body parts per year; if you multiply that, ▶



Foto: schwartz GmbH

In addition to the headquarters in Simmerath – and a production site operated by its subsidiary Hütte GmbH in the Schumag Industrial Park in Aachen – the schwartz Group now comprises a total of ten sites worldwide.

we easily reach around one billion car parts that pass through our systems every year," Wilden calculates. "This means that every morning when you fasten your seatbelt, the belt comes out of a so-called B-pillar, and the probability that this B-pillar has been heated in one of our systems is extremely high – no matter what make of car you drive." In 2003, schwartz received its first orders for heat treatment systems for press hardening from a major German car manufacturer. "That was another breakthrough," says the owner and CEO.

The requirements of the automotive industry

Today, the use of heat-treated steel components has become an integral part of modern car body construction – and continues to gain in importance: "Cars are becoming more robust and can be built with thinner and thus lighter steel parts that are adapted to the necessary hardness." This means greater vehicle safety combined with lower fuel consumption and therefore a reduction in CO₂ emissions due to the lower weight. "These are requirements that the automotive industry has to meet today," emphasizes Wilden.

"We supply manufacturers and their suppliers with the appropriate heat treatment systems for steels so that they can be processed into safety-critical structural parts using press hardening methods – such as A or B pillars, side impact beams or door frame reinforcements." schwartz is therefore making a major contribution to ensuring that car manufacturers can

construct their vehicles in a safer and more environmentally friendly way, regardless of the drive type.

Getting young people on board and thus becoming better known

"The lifesaver from Simmerath" was the title of an article published by FH Aachen University of Applied Sciences in 2019 about the sole owner of the schwartz Group, who himself studied business administration at the Aachen university and now awards two scholarships each year as part of the FH scholarship program. In 2017, he also donated one of the three lecture halls in the new UAS building on Eupener Strasse to his former university: the Alexander Wilden Lecture Hall. "As a hidden champion in the region, it is important to maintain close ties with universities and to foster young talent," says Wilden, explaining the company's broad-based commitment: "We provide apprenticeships and places for dual study programs and offer internships in various fields. We also support local sports clubs and take part in, or organize, various sporting events. Basically, we are trying to raise our profile by reaching out to young people when they are five years old on the sports field until they decide to do an apprenticeship, for example." This is one of the key challenges: "To acquire young talent within the framework in which we are looking for them," says Wilden, adding: "However, the challenge is not the

geographical location, contrary to what many people assume."

Rural regions offer advantages for a company

Wilden believes that there is a general trend towards the Eifel region: the location in the northern Eifel region could attract young mothers and fathers in particular. "I see clear advantages for the company in a rural area, where there is less competition for workers and commercial space is larger and cheaper. There is no reason for me NOT to stay here." This is also confirmed by the low level of fluctuation in the company. "After all, we work in a region where other people go on vacation."

"As a hidden champion in the region, it is important to maintain close ties with universities and to foster young talent."

Alexander Wilden, owner and CEO of the schwartz Group

And, unlike the advocates of a work-life balance, he does not differentiate between work and life: "Work is an integral part of life," affirms the 55-year-old.

A total of ten locations worldwide

In addition to the headquarters in Simmerath – and a production site operated by its subsidiary Hütte GmbH in the Schumag Industrial Park in Aachen – the schwartz Group now comprises a total of ten sites worldwide. In 2011, the first branch was founded in the People's Republic of China, at the last metro station just outside Shanghai, followed by a service branch in the USA in 2012, which moved to Naperville, near Chicago, in 2017. The schwartz gigafactory in Kunshan, China, was just inaugurated at the end of October: "This is an important milestone for us and also a commitment to the Chinese market, which we do not want to miss out on in Germany." However, the engineering of all systems and the main production will continue to take place in Simmerath, where the company, which was founded in 1984, has been based since 1998. "We started out small here at our headquarters, with an office building and an adjoining production hall just 15 by 30 meters in size. Today, we have over 20,000 square meters at our disposal worldwide," reports Wilden.

In 2012, for the first time the company had more than one hundred employees on its payroll, and in 2015, schwartz was one of the 500 fastest-growing companies in Germany – the



Foto: schwartz GmbH

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Inaugurated at the end of October: the new plant, the schwartz gigafactory, is located in Zhangpu Town Kunshan, China.

result of a study conducted by FOCUS magazine in collaboration with the statistics portal Statista. Finally, the greatest success of all: "Officially confirmed since 2016, we are ranked number one in all three global markets. That means we are the global market leader in the NAFTA states USA/Canada/Mexico, China, and in our home market of Europe."

How do you achieve this? "The starting point for success is always the customer's needs. We are among those who keep their ear to the ground," says the schwartz owner, who has also been Chairman of the Foreign Trade Committee of the Aachen Chamber of Industry and Commerce since 2022.

Seven percent of turnover for research and development

"Thanks to our global customer service, which is available 24/7 via our hotline, and perhaps also due to our workforce of 270 employees, we are able to react very quickly, develop prototypes and incorporate changes into existing products so that we can always meet these market needs worldwide." At a time when there is talk of energy shortages in Europe, for example, it is essential to react quickly to new requirements. The schwartz Group invests around seven percent of its turnover in research and development every year, and in 2017 – long before the crisis – the company group commissioned an industrial burner that

can be operated with one hundred percent green hydrogen. "With this burner, our customers can use any type of gaseous fuel they want. This means they can switch to CO₂-neutral fuels," Wilden explains and emphasizes: "Our focus is clearly on the future."

schwartz has also developed a digitization system with which the company is setting new standards on the market, and with the new technology of thermal printing, which allows users to create different temperature zones in the same blank, the company has hit a nerve. "If we disregard issues that we can't influence – such as the pandemic or political events – then the future is looking bright for our company." ■

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