At the beginning of 2018, the textile company Schmitz-Werke GmbH & Co. KG, Emsdetten, was restructured. In order to be able to react more quickly and flexibly to the markets and their demands, the brands drapilux, swela and mobiltex have since been combined under Schmitz Textiles.

Managing Director of this legally independent company is Stefan Ruholl, who has been working for Schmitz-Werke for more than 30 years, answering the questions of Textination. In 1996 he became head of the finishing department, three years later head of production and development for the textile finishing division, in the beginning of 2000 technical director, and finally 2018 he took over the management of the business unit and of the company Schmitz Textiles.

Schmitz Textiles is a family business that has been offering textile solutions for indoor and outdoor applications for more than 90 years. If you had to introduce yourself in 100 words to someone who doesn't know the company, what makes you unique?

As an almost fully integrated manufacturer in Germany, we have advantages that many other market players are likely to envy. We can respond flexibly, technically and with good service to the needs of our customers. Under the drapilux brand, we distribute intelligent design textiles for the contract sector, outdoor and sun protection fabrics under the swela brand and textiles for the automotive segment under the still young label mobiltex. All brands benefit from the broad know-how in production and product development. A few years ago, Germany as production location may have been regarded more negatively as a pure cost factor, but today we see this as valued by our partners as a clear strategic advantage.
In which product areas do market and partners particularly challenge you? And with which product innovations in the field of technical textiles do you think you can move most?

In each of our fields of activity, we are confronted with comprehensive challenges. At drapilux, for example, we have to meet strict safety requirements in the context of fire protection certifications for the use of our materials on cruise ships and have invested massively in this subject. The sun protection sector is characterized by high demands on color and light fastness combined with optimum resilience - here we were able to gain a major technological advantage with the change from acrylic to polyester qualities years ago.

With the new, award-winning development of our convertible top fabric for mobiltex, also based on polyester, we were able to realize product properties that are completely new in this form in this segment.

For which socially relevant topics do you see particularly great need for innovation in the upcoming 10 years and what is your assessment that the textile industry will be able to offer solutions with its products?

When we look at the next ten years, then it is surely the topic of sustainability that is already omnipresent today. At the moment we are living in a phase where we want sustainable products on the one hand, but, on the other hand, the willingness to pay higher prices for them is not yet pronounced and people tend towards staying with conventional products. This will change. Sustainable products
from companies that really live sustainability in the dimensions of ecology, economy and society will win the race. The textile industry offers the best conditions to turn this vision into reality - albeit under investment in production and research and development.

Today, product and technology innovations mean to a large extent digitalization of production and business processes. New business models often aim at verticalization and demand the path to batch size 1 - what does this mean for Schmitz Textiles?

For an industrial company with a B2B focus, such as Schmitz Textiles, "batch size 1" must be answered with a certain bandwidth. However, in principle, this topic is not new to us, for example in yarn dyeing, we can couple micro-installations for larger batches - and conversely control correspondingly smaller batches through our process chain. In the digital printing sector for the contract business, we are very individually and customer-oriented positioned with a minimum quantity of 25 meters. For our sister company and customer markilux we are supplier for their "Color on Demand" offer for the individual awning cloth with a choice of 1625 RAL colors. With an industrial production scale, you can hardly get much closer to "lot size 1".
To break new ground means decisiveness, overcoming fears - and with that the courage to fail. Not every project can succeed. Which entrepreneurial decision are you particularly happy about having made it in retrospect?

If we look further back, about ten years ago, the decision to invest in digital printing and to build up know-how and our own production capacities was the right one. Having passed through these learning curves enables us today to expand our offer into the outdoor market without major problems. We are currently more convinced than ever that by entering the automotive segment with the still young mobiltex brand, we have established a new, important keystone for the long-term future of Schmitz Textiles.

The textile industry has been growing steadily worldwide for decades. The consumption of chemical and textile fibres more than quadrupled between 1975 and 2016. In terms of sustainability, there is, to put it mildly, a mixed feedback for our industry. What are Schmitz Textiles concentrating on in order to fulfil their social responsibility?

If textiles are produced exclusively in Germany, the regulatory framework already requires a certain sustainable orientation. But of course, there is also room for maneuver. In order to meet the high demands of a sustainable and environmentally friendly production, we operate a very high expenditure. For example, all dyestuffs and textile auxiliaries are first checked for compliance with laws and regulations and for environmental and occupational safety aspects before they are used in-house. In addition, voluntary measures were implemented in the area of production long before legislation came into force, such as regenerative thermal post-combustion for the post-treatment of process exhaust air from finishing plants. This ensures that no harmful emissions are caused by exhaust air, waste water or noise. Many projects have also been successfully implemented for energy recovery from process waste water and process exhaust air. All process waste is either returned to the production workflow, recycled or professionally disposed of. A contribution to environmental protection, that should not be underestimated, is the use of synthetic fibres (here: polyester), which can be modified with much less chemicals than natural fibres and are much more durable.
With Soundwise, drapilux has for the first time introduced flexible elements that improve the acoustics and can be integrated into the existing architecture.

The next Techtextil is just around the corner. What are your expectations at the Frankfurt trade fair?

We are a young but at the same time an almost 100-year-old company, having emerged from the corporate reorganization of Schmitz-Werke GmbH + Co. KG on January 1, 2018. Consequently, we are exhibiting for the first time as Schmitz Textiles GmbH + Co KG with our three brands mobiltex, swela and drapilux. We want to present ourselves as a textile competence center. However, the automotive textiles theme will be somewhat in the foreground. We are exhibiting a complete convertible roof with our mobiltex 388 soft top fabric, which was nominated for the German Innovation Award 2019 by the German Design Council, and we are confident that we may accept an award at the end of May.

The interview was conducted by Ines Chucholowius, CEO Textination GmbH

As part of its Newsline, Textination will give innovation leaders of the industry a special place to talk about success, experiences, forecasts and trends.