



STALATUBE

wants to get in touch

Finnish tube manufacturer Stalatable has not only committed itself to fulfilling their customers' wishes with custom made products, but also to actively finding out what these wishes are. Indeed, determining customers' needs when it comes to stainless steel hollow sections is one of the main topics on the agenda of Stalatable's management, as Stainless Steel World learned during an interview with President Jan Christiansen and Marketing Director Jussi Aro. We asked them how this specialist tube manufacturer is able to meet customer demand and how it is actively searching for customer feedback.

For those who are not familiar with the name Stalatable it may be somewhat surprising to learn that the company does not actually make any round tubes. Stalatable is fully focused on the production of square stainless steel hollow sections. And with success. The company's history started in 1972 with Stala, a company that mainly produced (and still produces) stainless steel kitchen sinks. A year later Stala started making catering equipment that required small tubes which, at first, were bought from another company nearby. Not much later it was decided that it would be better to produce these tubes in house, laying the foundation for present day Stalatable. In January 2000 Stalatable was separated from Stala as it had outgrown its mother company. "We now have 100 people in our company and eleven production lines. Ninety per cent of our production is exported to 37 countries all over the world. Besides our Finnish headquarters we have two foreign sales offices, one in the Netherlands and one in the US," said Mr Christiansen, summing up the growth that Stalatable has gone through in the past years. Today the company is specialised in manufacturing stainless steel hollow sections that are predominantly used in the construction of buildings, offering strength, safety and beauty at the same time. For example, two of the eye catching buildings where

Stalatable played an important role by providing hollow sections, Mr Christiansen pointed out, are the Scandinavian embassy in Berlin and the Nokia headquarters in Helsinki. The latter required an immense amount of 140 tons of 316 hollow section in its construction. However, strength and beauty are not the only reasons why an architect would choose to use stainless steel hollow sections. "You can also find our tubes in the Elb tunnel in Hamburg as part of the roofing construction," Mr Christiansen said. "The reason to use our products here is the fire resistance of stainless steel. In case of a fire in a tunnel, temperatures can rise to 1200 degrees C and our products can withstand these circumstances."

CUT-TO-LENGTH

The majority of Stalatable's production concerns 6 metre lengths of hollow sections in dimensions that range from 25 x 25 x 1.2 mm to 300 x 300 x 12.5 mm., marketing director Jussi Aro explained. "Our rectangular sections range from 30 x 20 x 1.2 mm to 400 x 200 x 12.5 mm. We consider these 6 metre lengths standard production as they take care of most of the demand and are the easiest to handle in transport." Obviously, providing hollow sections for construction applications also means having to deal with requests for all kinds of different shapes and sizes as no two buildings are the same. At Stalatable, everything is aimed at being able to meet all the different requests from customers. Mr Aro: "Anything that is ordered outside of the 6 metre window is custom made production. And that's where Stalatable's famous cut-to-length service comes in. It means the company is able to cut any length a customer desires and will only charge for the amount delivered." That may sound obvious but Mr Aro explained that many suppliers charge for the complete length of the initial section regardless of the length actually needed by the client. The rest is sold as scrap by the supplier. Eliminating scrap is one of the main reasons why Stalatable has started to provide their cut-to-length service, Mr Aro continues. "As opposed to round tubes, that are often used in pipelines, customers sometimes have

The Production Management Team with production manager Kimmo Hietanen, production planner Terho Järvinen and production engineer Kimmo Myyrä.



Sales department. In the front, from left to right, Export manager Rainer Grahl, export assistants Maire Häme and Mari Karvonen, sales manager Sami Tähtinen and sales secretary Saija Pystynen. In the back, from left to right, Marketing director Jussi Aro, export assistant Minna Jalava, managing director Jan Christiansen and purchase manager Marko Urpalainen.

little need for exactly 6 metre lengths of square tubes. Our production facility is flexible enough to handle anything between 4 and 12 metres directly. Longer lengths have to be welded together. The longest section we have ever made was 24 metres long, but I have no doubt that we are able to make any length required. The only limit we face is transportation, you can surely imagine that transporting anything over 24 metres is quite a challenge."

Flexibility is one of the keys to the success of Stalalube, Mr Christiansen added. "Our strength is that we can offer anything in terms of length and dimensions. Our production area houses the biggest continuous welding line for stainless steel square tubes and all the machines can be easily set to form the required tubes straight from coil." This forming is done with massive, 500kw welding machines that shape the material from coil into a square section that is consequently

welded shut with a single tig/sigma weld. An economical and esthetical way of producing these tubes, Mr Christiansen said. "Other ways of producing tubes often involve two separate U-shaped sections that are welded together which is more expensive and esthetically not as sound."

SALES

Producing hollow sections is one thing, getting them to the customers is another. The fact that Stalalube sells its products in 37 countries indicates that it is quite successful in doing so. Through distributors it reaches its end users who are not only to be found in construction but also in areas such as the process industry, pulp and paper industry, offshore and in the food industry, where hygiene is especially important. Mr Christiansen: "Ninety five per cent of our customers are distributors and we really consider them to be an integral

part of our sales organisation.

Through them we are able to reach customers world-wide as over ninety per cent of our production is exported, twenty per cent of which to countries outside of Europe such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand and to Asia."

Apart from selling products, distributors also play an increasingly important role by supporting Stalalube in its contacts with end users. Mr Christiansen explained that especially technical support is getting more important in helping end users find the right product for their needs. In order to facilitate high quality technical support, distributors have to keep up to date with Stalalube's products and the possibilities they offer. That's why Stalalube has set up a special program for technical product training. These training sessions take place at Stalalube or at the distributors' facilities, depending on what suits best. "The goal is to inform them about

the possible applications of our products and provide them with more technical background information so that they are more confident in selling our products. What they don't know, they don't sell!" Mr Christiansen said.

Technical knowledge is not only transferred to distributors, end users too can contact Stalutube to learn about their products and possibilities. "For example, when an architect designs a construction in which he wants to use hollow sections, he or his client are warmly invited to get in touch with us and talk with our technical staff about what kind of section will suit his needs best."

GET IN TOUCH

But Stalutube wants to do more than selling products and providing technical support. It has committed itself to finding out what customers want and increase its feeling with the market. Mr Christiansen: "Currently, market expectations for the future are uncertain. We want to generate more tangible information on future developments so that we can prepare our organisation accordingly. For instance, I expect the demand for hollow sections to increase as companies

FACTS & FIGURES

Name:	Stalutube Oy
Founded:	5th May 1972
Head Office and Production plant:	Finland, Lahti
Sales units:	Stalutube B.V. Zevenbergen, Holland Stalutube Inc. Philadelphia, USA
Turnover:	Year 2001 50 EUR million
Foreign operations:	90% of turnover
Personnel:	100
Cut to length service:	Stalutube can supply hollow sections ready cut at the factory to the required length and angle.

Product information

Dimensions: (standard)
 Square Hollow Sections: 25 x 25 x 1.2 - 300 x 300 x 12.5 mm
 Rectangular Hollow Sections: 30 x 20 x 1.2 - 400 x 200 x 12.5 mm
 The standard length is 6 metres.

Tolerances

- ASTM A-554
- EN 10219
- DIN 59411
- DIN 2395

Materials

- Stainless steels and special materials, austenitic grades for projects.
- Surface Finish
- lightly brushed
- polished (Grit 220 - 400)
- pickled

start to replace existing carbon steel elements with stainless steel ones. The industry is focusing more on life cycle costing issues and it will be more interesting to use stainless steel products as they offer much better economics in the long run. Nowadays, stainless steel tubular products only account for 1 – 2 per cent of total steel tubular sales, so even a growth of 2 percent would mean a doubling of the demand for stainless tubular products. I think that, for example, in a few years time we will have heavy duplex sections that can replace the ST52 carbon steels that are currently used in oil platforms. However, it's just one of the possibilities we see, the fact is that in practice we find a new application almost every day!" As the company has experienced a healthy growth in the past few years and wants to maintain that growth in the future, it has realised that closer co-operation with end users and building up long term relationships is paramount objective. Talking with customers, informing them about Stalutube's products and learning about their experiences and wishes is one of the key points that Mr Christiansen and Mr Aro are focussing on right now. Mr Aro: "At the moment, we inform our clients about new product developments mainly through advertising and conferences. Our web site offers an ex-

tensive overview of our products and services, but it is still predominantly a one way information stream. It has to become more interactive. It is critical for us to know in what way our customers are using our products and what new product developments they would welcome. If we don't have this knowledge we cannot develop new products and adjust our processes accordingly." Stalutube has already begun actively opening communication channels in Scandinavia and is now concentrating its efforts on Europe. Together with its distributors it tries to get in touch with end users and get face-to-face with them. It is not as simple as it sounds though, as closer co-operation means that end user, distributor and manufacturer must be willing to invest in an open, long term relationship. Mr Aro: "It takes a bit more effort but I seriously think that in the long run, everyone will benefit from better communications between manufacturer and end user. We will be able to allocate our production facilities more efficiently which will have positive effects on, for example, product availability and production times. So it is in our customers' own interest to get in touch with Stalutube and inform us about their experiences and wishes for the future. Then we can meet market demand more efficiently and maintain our record of customer satisfaction." ◀