



# rff – A perfect fit Offering an attractive complete package

Even where the focus is largely on standardised products, it is possible to achieve far more than just the solid standard. This is illustrated by the success story of rff Rohr Flansch Fitting Handels GmbH. As a leading stockholder trader in pipes, flanges, fittings and piping equipment, the medium-sized company deals primarily in standardised products in DIN, EN and ASME. Nevertheless, in addition to its role as a stockholder, rff has also succeeded in positioning itself as a project partner in international business – the two managing directors, Hartmut Böttche and Michael Alexi, reveal how in an interview with *Stainless Steel World*.





Directing Managers Michael Alexi (left) and Hartmut Böttche.

### A highly capable partner

“We see ourselves as an internationally-active trading company and highly capable partner to our customers,” says rff Managing Director and company founder Hartmut Böttche. Michael Alexi, also Managing Director and responsible for Sales & Procurement, adds: “With our continuously growing expertise in international business we not only boast a large range of over 60,000 items in stock and a high level of service expertise, our set-up also allows us to offer expert support to the projects of our major clients, with their worldwide locations.” One key factor in this area is a comprehensive, worldwide network of qualified manufacturers of pipes, flanges and fittings. In this respect the focus is upon Europe, as well as Asia and the Middle East. “The rff site in China has been operating successfully in the Asian region for more than ten years now. As a consequence, our business partners can make use of our years of expertise in this region and above all China. Continuous plant audits and partnerships such as professional expediting serve to ensure our high standard of quality,” says Alexi, adding: “In global project business in particular a solid body of expertise, including the cultural expertise we have accumulated in over 20 years of purchasing in China, is highly important”.

### Strict approval processes

Naturally, this experience also covers audits, plant visits and the monitoring of production. “The combination of stock holder and project partner in direct business for piping material in the high-pressure segment in the standards DIN,

EN and ASME means we can offer our international customers an attractive complete package in a form that few other providers are able to reflect,” Alexi explains.

However, this service alone would be of little value without the necessary product quality. This is also something Alexi is aware of: “The subject of material quality is of key significance for us. As part of its corporate philosophy, rff stands for the supply of high-quality products.”

The fact that these are not merely empty words is demonstrated by Jens Fuhrken, whose tasks as head of IMS (Integrated Management Systems) also include quality management: “All suppliers are subject to a strict approval process. Partners who wish to work with us undergo thorough checks and audits even before the first order and onwards. Global markets and the subsequent geographical distances mean that rff only works with certified manufacturers who can guarantee a high standard of quality,” emphasises Fuhrken. “We document these high requirements in the form of exhaustive inspections, which in international business are often undertaken directly at the manufacturing plant. We also make no compromises when it comes to certifying the goods,” says Fuhrken.

### Highest quality

It therefore comes as no surprise that rff has an impressive range of approvals and certifications, verifying the highest quality. These include DIN EN ISO 9001 and DIN EN ISO 14001, as well as the QM system as per DGRL 2014/68/EU and the re-marking agreement as per DIN EN 764-5 section 6. In addition, the company is a

A world in transition: digitalisation is revolutionising many areas of life, whilst geopolitical crises and strong fluctuations in the commodities markets make life more difficult to plan. In times of permanent change and increasing international competition, continuity and reliability are increasing in value. When it comes to international project business in particular, rff offers its internationally-active business partners well thought-out, competent solutions in its capacity as service provider and package builder, stock holder and project partner in both MRO and project business.



## [ COVER STORY ]

TÜV-approved processor in accordance with AD 2000 technical bulletin W0. The success story of the rff trading company began in 1976. This was the year Hartmut Böttche founded the firm, in Stuhr. Prior to this, Böttche had gained experience as a salesman for flanges. "There were three of us to begin with – my wife and I and one other employee," Böttche recalls.

### Continuous expansion

The first site was a 1,000 square meter warehouse with office, located on the Brinkum-Nord industrial estate. The relocation to the current site in Carl-Zeiss-Straße came at the beginning of the 1980s. Events then moved quickly: 1984 saw the establishment of the sites in Erkrath/Düsseldorf and Nuremberg. In 1991 these were joined by Leipzig (the new site in Beucha/Leipzig was erected in 1995). The Mannheim site has been in place since 2008. April 2009 witnessed the inauguration of the automated storage facility for pipes in Beucha/Leipzig, which remains the largest investment in the company's history. "Although there are numerous little mosaic pieces that make up the whole picture as we see it today, the continuous expansion of the Beucha/Leipzig site with the two automated pipe storage systems with an overall capacity of 3,700 storage spaces is

*"In international business it's not just about supplying a flange or a pipe; it's about offering globally-active customers a complete package, enabling them to concentrate on their core business."*

*Michael Alexi*



The head office in Stuhr / Bremen has four sales departments and is the central warehouse for pipe connections.



A clear sign of the company's focus on customer service: rff continues to rely on its own fleet of vehicles.

certainly one of these," acknowledges Böttche. A further move was the occupancy of the expanded office space in Stuhr/Bremen in the summer of 2009. The organic growth of the company is also evident in another respect: more than 200 young people have completed apprenticeships at rff since the company was founded. "Today, many of the positions at our company are held by "home grown" employees" says Böttche. "To ensure that this remains the case in future, we are sure not to neglect

training and further training. Because 'knowledge' is the foundation of any company we place great emphasis on having our employees actively accompany the growth of rff," Böttche continues.

### Loyal, long-term customers

Although the two managing directors are pleased with the growth thus far, there is one thing they are unanimous on: growth can only be accompanied by a consistently high-quality delivery service. "As a qualified trading and distribution company we have made this our maxim, with high-quality products and loyal, long-term customers," stresses Böttche.

The current situation on the international markets means that growth represents a particular challenge. Alexi is also aware of this, when he says: "We still find ourselves in a difficult market environment, even though we continue to grow further as a company. Most of the sectors that we supply are still in crisis mode. The distribution trade for pressurised pipes and accessories remains in the 'eye of the storm'. Delivery times of the suppliers and fluctuating commodity prices remain the largest challenge at this time. However, 2017 was a more solid market than 2016, and we can look to 2018 with more optimism."

### Digitalisation as opportunity and challenge

The profound changes affecting the markets are also evident in the fact that aspects such as small batches, price volatility and market transparency play a

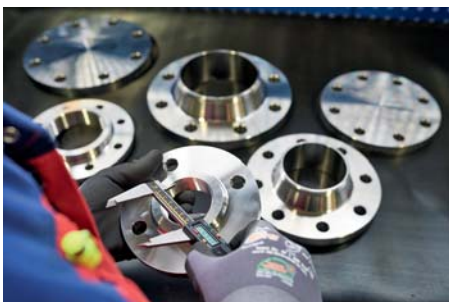


Thanks to a large number of processing options – including two sawing machines – the company can react flexibly to customer requests.

far greater role today than was the case a few years ago. “Day-to-day business now involves smaller batches and reaction times have shortened. In addition, there is greater competition for projects on the international market. Price pressure has increased, due to the decrease in market volume and subsequent increase in competition,” summarises Alexi. A further challenge is the onset of digitalisation in the branch, although this also represents an opportunity, Alexi emphasises: “Lots of clocks in the sector are still ticking in analogue. It is not yet possible to talk of a digitalised business.” Nevertheless, there are increasing signs that business processes are becoming more digital. “With the exception of a few pioneers, digitalisation is still in its infancy, but we are actively influencing this trend,” says Alexi. Böttche is aware that the challenge lies in involving both business partners and employees in this process: “Only a well thought-out concept that focuses on added value will work in the long term.”

**Added value for customers**

The opportunities arising from digitalisation with regard to sales lie in the chance to not only offer the customer a better service, but also to strengthen customer loyalty, Alexi adds: “However, to achieve this it is necessary to give the customer opportunities that he does not



Material quality is of crucial importance: pictured are stainless steel flanges.



The inauguration of the new pipe cassette storage took place in Beucha / Leipzig In April 2009.

*“Online solutions need to be a practical supplement to existing sales channels. Consulting expertise will become increasingly important in the future.”*  
**Michael Alexi**

yet have in this form. Added value is in particular focus in this respect.” As a consequence, instead of focusing solely on digitalisation, Böttche and Alexi favour a balanced mix of digital and established sales channels. “One important criteria for us is that the customer can choose between different cross-channel options when purchasing material,” says Alexi. “Ultimately, he himself is best able to decide which is the best solution for him. We offer him different options, which we will continue

to improve in future with the expansion of our ‘My rff’ online platform.”

**On the pulse of time**

For Alexi, one thing is certain: the ongoing digitalisation of sales channels and processes within the company calls for practical solutions that offer the customer added value whilst also making the company more efficient. “Online solutions in both sales and purchasing need to be a practical supplement to existing sales channels. Consulting expertise will become increasingly important for our products in the future,” Alexi reveals. Once again, it is apparent that rff is not only well positioned in its traditional markets as distributor, project partner and package builder, but also in the international business, and is willing and able to adapt to new times and challenges. Nevertheless, rff remains true to itself, despite its capacity to change – and a reliable player within the sector, aiming to be the perfect fit for its customers.

**rff at a glance**

Form of company: GmbH (limited company)  
 Managing directors: Hartmut Böttche and Michael Alexi  
 Year founded: 1976  
 Focus: Distributor and trader in pipes, flanges, fittings and accessories in accordance with DIN, EN and ASME  
 Markets: Industrial pipeline construction and plant engineering, container and apparatus construction, chemical industry, oil and gas industry, power plant technology and shipbuilding  
 Turnover 2016: 108 million euros  
 Employees: Around 350, including 30 trainees  
 Sites: Headquarters in Stuhr/Bremen with four sales departments and the central warehouse for flanges and fittings. Central warehouse for pipes and sales location in Leipzig, with further sales departments in Düsseldorf, Mannheim and Nuremberg as well as the rff China Ltd. near Shenyang.  
 Warehouse capacity: 14,000 tonnes  
 Website: www.rff.de/en