

ALFRED KÄRCHER

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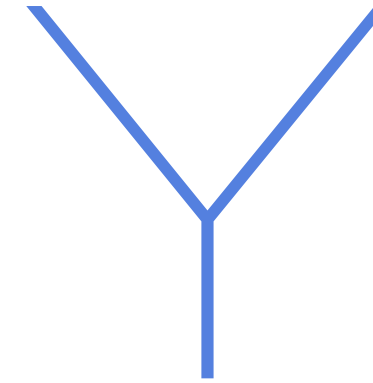
CORPORATE BROCHURE





Cleaning up

Alan Swaby takes a look at an industrial brand that is almost as well known in the home as it is in the factory



ou know you are doing something right as a company when your brand name turns into a verb. Just as 'to Google' is synonymous in everyday speech with the act of searching for something on the internet, so too in some European dictionaries there is the verb 'to Kärcher'—signifying cleaning down surfaces by means of pressurised water.

Among industrial brand names, Kärcher must rank up there with the best of them: not surprising, as Kärcher products today are sold in all countries across the entire planet. Even if there are now similar competitive products available to clean the winter muck from our patio, the original high-pressure cleaning wand from Kärcher is where the whole thing started.

Alfred Kärcher was something of a back yard boffin. He started in 1935 and never stopped, responsible for an amazing range of inventions—including heating systems for passenger cabins in aircraft. At the other end of the spectrum, Kärcher developed Europe's first hot water pressure washer in 1950. At some stage afterwards, the company board finally decided that managing such a diverse range of goods was not the most effective way of doing business; and from 1974 on, the German company concentrated solely on high pressure cleaning.

As the world's largest brand in industrial cleaning products, today the company employs more than 8,500 people. Turnover last year was €1.5 billion, half of which came from products



aimed at professional users rather than the domestic market. Bettina Mehrholz is a Kärcher sales manager with the enviable task of selling these products to key accounts globally. “In my part of the business,” she says, “illicit copies are not really an issue but there is always plenty of legitimate competition. Kärcher stays in the number one position because we invest heavily in R&D and are constantly introducing new and better products. As an example, 85 per cent of the sales this division makes come from products that are less than five years old.”

The technology of applying hot water under pressure may be relatively simple, but there is still plenty of room for innovation, says Mehrholz.

“The improvements we make,” she says, “are more often related to user friendliness and lower operating costs. My clients are looking for reliable performance and high productivity. In this type of environment, it is important that operating the machine is as automated as possible.”

A case in point is a newly introduced scrubber/drier called the B40—the ubiquitous machine used to clean (for example) hard floors in restaurants or in retail stores the world over. The latest version not only has an economy mode for those seasons of the year when the degree of soiling is light but it also incorporates an intelligent key system which allows the supervisor to input the correct

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operating parameters into the scrubber using RFID transfer technology. Relieved of the responsibility for the machine’s settings, the operator can concentrate all his attention on cleaning the floor. And as nobody likes cleaning up afterwards, the machine incorporates its own self-cleaning process.

Mehrholz maintains that the real difference between Kärcher and competitive brands becomes truly apparent during operation. “For the machine itself to be manoeuvrable and not obstruct the operator’s visibility might not be the first buying decisions to be considered but they make an enormous difference to productivity,” she says.

Kärcher's key accounts are often facility management companies which know exactly what products they need for the job. But there are plenty of other international businesses wanting to benefit from economies of scale by buying from a single supplier which look to Kärcher for advice and guidance. In this respect, Kärcher provides the entire package of machinery, detergents and training.

Despite the size of the company, Kärcher is still a family business and run on family business lines. During the recent recession, the company

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continued to invest into new employees, contrary to the common trend.

Kärcher also likes to do its bit by donating its services to some of the world's most important buildings and monuments. St Peter's Square at the Vatican, Mount Rushmore and the famous statue of Christ overlooking Rio de Janeiro have all been spruced up by Kärcher. Sure, it is good local publicity but it also enables the technical staff to learn more about cleaning precious surfaces without harming them.

With a social conscience and a philosophy of striving for more productive and environmentally friendly products, Kärcher is contributing to a more sustainable future. Long may it continue to clean up.

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