

# Sandner – A Good Eye for Success

**Companies talk** --Test equipment company with headquarters in Biebesheim is a specialist that is in demand globally - Universities and Industrial companies are its customers

By ACHIM PREU

When the topic of test instruments comes up, Schenck and Hottinger immediately come to mind, two industrial companies with a rich tradition. But employees who leave these companies take with them the know-how they acquired in Darmstadt, know-how without which airplanes could not take off and high-speed trains could not drive. Now new employers are exploiting that know-how, or it serves as a foundation for their own businesses, as is the case with Sandner-Messtechnik GmbH in Biebesheim.

Rudolf Sandner (58) worked for 25 years at Schenck, in the end as supervisor of the testing department where he "learned a lot." At age 40 he began to work on his own part-time in his home basement. Initially he produced exclusively for Schenk: Very small production runs of instruments used in material and component testing that could not be produced economically in-house at Schenk. Because orders were growing, and there were differences of opinion, Sandner opened his business to the general market and in 1988 founded his own company in Biebesheim.

Today, according to company information, this truly family business – his daughter and son work together with him – is one of the four or five global producers of such complex test instruments used exclusively for scientific and research purposes. Level of precision: One ten thousandth of a millimeter.

As though that were not challenging enough, the instruments must also be able to operate in the high-

temperature range of up to 1800 degrees Celsius. Sandner confidently says: "We do not have very much competition." The company delivers its products to the USA, Japan and Russia. Its export quota of 20 to 30 percent is said to be definitely "capable of growth". Resellers handle the consultation-intensive business beyond the borders. In spite of the low-profile industry, and in spite of much word of mouth promotion, it is primarily the Internet that is "a blessing" for Sandner in internationalizing his company. It brings contacts and initial inquiries, and it is also used to purchase materials.

Nevertheless, there are also many business relationships right at home, e.g. with the Materialprüfungsanstalt

["Material Testing Institute"], the Fraunhofer Institute, and the Technical University of Darmstadt. The company's current project with the Institute of Material Science at the university in Darmstadt involves a cruciform test specimen extensometer. Testing consists of pulling on four sides of a material – whether aluminum, ceramic, carbon fiber or plastic – and electrically measuring changes in the molecular structure at the center of the forces. Applications include the production of gas and steam turbines. It is believed that these are the first such instruments worldwide. This highlights the innovative power of Sandner GmbH, where the primary focus is on development as a permanent process. Naturally external design offices are also utilized, and university theses are written in the process. Another company manager is son

Thorsten (30) who was educated as an electrical engineer at the technical collage in Darmstadt. His

produce everything: From one to 10,000 pieces". Two thirds of forecast sales of three million euros in

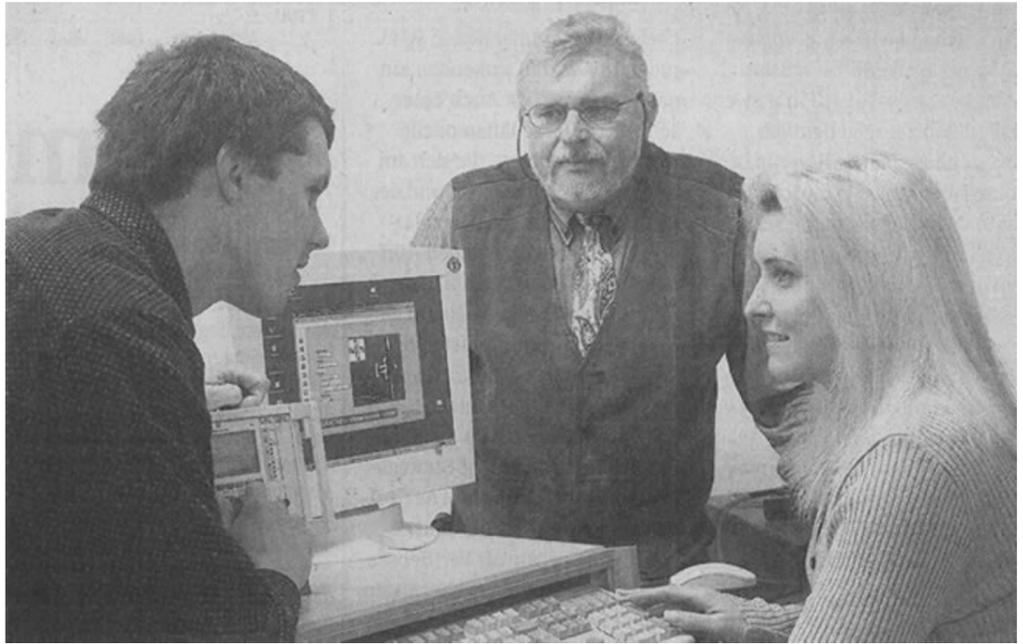
his team, whose pay exceeds the currently negotiated union wages of the metalworkers union, as the

current responsibilities relate to production. 95 percent of all components used in Sandner test instruments are fabricated in-house. The reasoning behind this decision is that it allows the company to react more quickly and flexibly. This is because even a fully customized instrument often needs to be produced within four weeks, and this approach eliminates dependencies on third parties and averts potential quality problems. Of course a well-equipped machining center is required, and it always needs to be brought up to date. In the current fiscal year 250,000 euros were invested in a processing center, where cost-effectiveness and efficiency are essential. To better utilize its capacity the company also contracts services to outside companies: Machining, lathe work, boring and coating. Tool-making and mold construction are also performed. Automotive OEMs such as Opel, VW and Daimler-Chrysler are among its customers (primarily measuring instruments for engine test stands). Another customer is the dental specialist Sirona based in Bensheim. They chuckle a bit as they reminisce over the one or more replacement parts they fabricated for the Gernsheim ferry boat. Thorsten Sandner: "We

2002 – in the "very good prior year" sales were 2.5 million – are from its jobbing production. Clearly, Sandner by far does not net what is possible for test instruments: Double-digit returns. It can afford this because of its strong market position and its modular system consisting of 350 standard types which allows Sandner to implement customized solutions cost-effectively. It is quite easy for the customer to retrofit or expand the instrument later. Prices range from 1,000 to 12,000 euros per instrument. In total, Sandner has about 1,000 names in his file card index: Single purchase and long-term customers, whereby 30 percent of orders come from public institutions such as the Berg Academy in Freiberg or the University of Leipzig.

"Growth should be slow and healthy" in all attempts to increase in size. That is the guiding motto. And that is how it should continue to be. What proved to be a bottleneck was the workforce that was spread thin. Therefore Sandner himself trained them more intensively. Five apprentices were trained recently, and currently one of the 22 employees. As a rule, qualified young people are hired too. The average age of the workforce is about 35 years. They work in two or three shifts. Sandner Sr. describes

"cream of the crop" He is just as proud of this fact as he is of his own initiative in making the leap to independence and in expanding his business. Since there are no successor issues, and demand is steadily increasing ("We are not feeling the effects of business recession"), and the company's half developed property is on the verge of a 5,000 square meter expansion, the future looks bright. There really are not many mid-sized companies that can say that about themselves today.



**Family council:** Thorsten Sandner (left), father Rudolf and sister Melanie want to promote the success of Sandner-Messtechnik GmbH in Biebesheim together with their motivated team.

PHOTO: KARL-HEINZ BÄRTL

## Company portrait

### Sandner Messtechnik GmbH

#### Business sector:

Test equipment

#### Products:

Test instruments for materials research, sub-contracting services

#### Location:

Biebesheim

#### Sales:

Three million euros (2002)

#### CEO:

Rudolf Sandner

#### Founded in:

1980

#### Employees:

22

#### Customers:

Opel, Daimler-Chrysler, BMW, universities, material testing institutes, etc.



**Rather unassuming** is the Sandner headquarters in Biebesheim – but this is where the company produces for the global market.