



The Secret of the Better Bed

What works for Völker AG

Völker AG manufactures modern hospital and healthcare beds. Despite the fraught situation in the public health sector, this mid-sized German firm is holding its own in the market. That is in no small measure due to the company's managing director, who is always bursting with new ideas.

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Heinrich Völker is the managing director of Völker AG, which has been generating innovative ideas for hospitals and rest homes for 42 years now



Heinrich Völker is always looking for dialogue—with customers and employees

As painful as self-awareness can be, it can have a healing function as well. Years ago, a stay in the hospital while he was critically ill offered Heinrich Völker a new perspective on his professional challenges, from rather a different angle. “Now I ask myself even more, ‘How would you like to be cared for?’ And I know full well that if I am lying flat on my back, awake and in pain, I at least want to be in a hotel atmosphere. I don’t want to be trapped in medical apparatus.”

Heinrich Völker has long since been back on his feet, but his empathy for patients and those with limited mobility is as great as ever. He is now the third generation to run the Völker AG family business, guiding it away from its origins as a cabinet making company to a state-of-the-art production plant. The company specialty: beds

offers matching nightstands, armchairs, and extras. In exploring new ideas, the managing director’s objective is always to meet everyone’s requirements: not only hospital and nursing home clients, but his clients’ clients as well (patients and people with limited mobility). As Heinrich Völker puts it, “The beds need to be as user-friendly as possible, so that patients don’t have to summon a nurse every time they want to change a setting.” But self-awareness isn’t the only unmistakable feature of Völker products. For years, a penchant for perfectionism has been a hallmark of the company’s production, paving the way for an equally promising future.

Flying shavings, sawdust, and materials stacked up to the ceiling used to be the order of the day. The carpenter’s shop, paint shop, and production department all operated as completely independent divisions. Each work procedure

“Here everyone is free to speak their minds and contribute their thoughts. We all benefit from that—both the employees and the company.”

HEINRICH VÖLKER

with the best possible positioning options, easy-to-use electronics, special guard rails to prevent falls, and a look that is more reminiscent of a spa than of a hospital. Design, not sterility; wood and stainless steel, not plastic. And it’s all topped off with a range that

in the production process—from sawing to sanding, screw tightening, and installation—took place in separate cubicles. These days, the plant in Witten (North Rhine-Westphalia) boasts an ultra-modern production hall with optimal use of space, where →



Both the hospital bed (left) and the Vis-a-Vis bed have a powerful motor which Völker developed jointly with Porsche Engineering, another subsidiary of the sports car company



Völker combines exclusive design with innovative technology: A new type of basal spring system, the newly developed motor, and simple controls are responsible for the good reputation of these beds





The projects with Porsche Consulting have a sustainable effect: Optimum use is made of the production hall, where a bed leaves the assembly line every four minutes

a new healthcare bed rolls off the assembly line every four minutes—and into an astonishingly tranquil, uncluttered atmosphere. “It’s like night and day,” says Völker, well aware that the conditions which previously reigned at his company would have a disastrous impact today. “The business industry has changed, and there is greater competition,” says the 68-year-old, whose company has been advised by Porsche Consulting for the past ten years. “Innovation, modern technology, and improved conditions will help us break

into the international market as well. Even at this point, our previous projects have been planned with sustainable advances in mind, and we will continue to expand on this.” The lean philosophy will soon encompass integration of the company’s other divisions; the projects for service and office duties have already begun. “Mr. Völker’s aim is to implement lean principles throughout the company,” says consultant Demetrios Kappos, who adds, “For him, it goes without saying that employees can be released from their

duties to carry this out.” For the director, participation means responsibility. Völker notes, “Everyone here is free to express opinions and to propose their own ideas. Then we all benefit—the employees and the company.”

Völker’s latest innovations are perfect examples: the Vis-a-Vis high-end bed and the extremely efficient, low-maintenance motor developed in 2006, in collaboration with Porsche Engineering, another Porsche subsidiary. A modular system enables a greater variety of uses than before. On the Vis-a-Vis bed, by positioning the rear section upright and sliding the foot section to create an armchair, the patient can not only sit and stand more easily, mobility is increased as well. In

addition to completely new levels of patient comfort, Völker estimates that using this bed saves at least ten minutes of patient care every day—and these minutes currently cost approximately 70 cents each. In early 2009, the new bed made its debut at trade fairs, and was a hit. “We have launched a new product that is far removed from the cheap articles which are beginning to push their way onto the market,” says Völker, a man with a mission. “I am convinced that customers value our approach to sustainability and top quality.” And in this appraisal, one can see what is at work here: self-awareness with a healing effect. ←

Völker AG

Völker AG designs and produces beds and comfortable furnishings for hospitals as well as for institutional and home care.

- ▶ *Headquarters: Witten, North Rhine-Westphalia*
- ▶ *Secondary plant: Hainichen, Saxony*
- ▶ *Branches: France and Belgium; distributors in 23 countries*
- ▶ *History:*
 - 1912: Heinrich Völker I establishes a cabinet maker’s shop.*
 - 1939: His son Heinrich Völker II reorganizes production to encompass all aspects of furnishing, including institutional equipment.*
 - 1967: Grandson Heinrich Völker III assumes control of the company, specializing in production of technical healthcare furniture.*
- ▶ *Employees in 2008: 301*
- ▶ *2008 sales: 78 million euros*
- ▶ *Export percentage in 2008: 50 percent*



What started as a small carpentry shop now has a highly modern production hall.

Ordering principles based on Kaizen philosophy make the work of Völker’s employees easier