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50 Years of VEKA
QUALITY. RELIABILITY. SAFETY.

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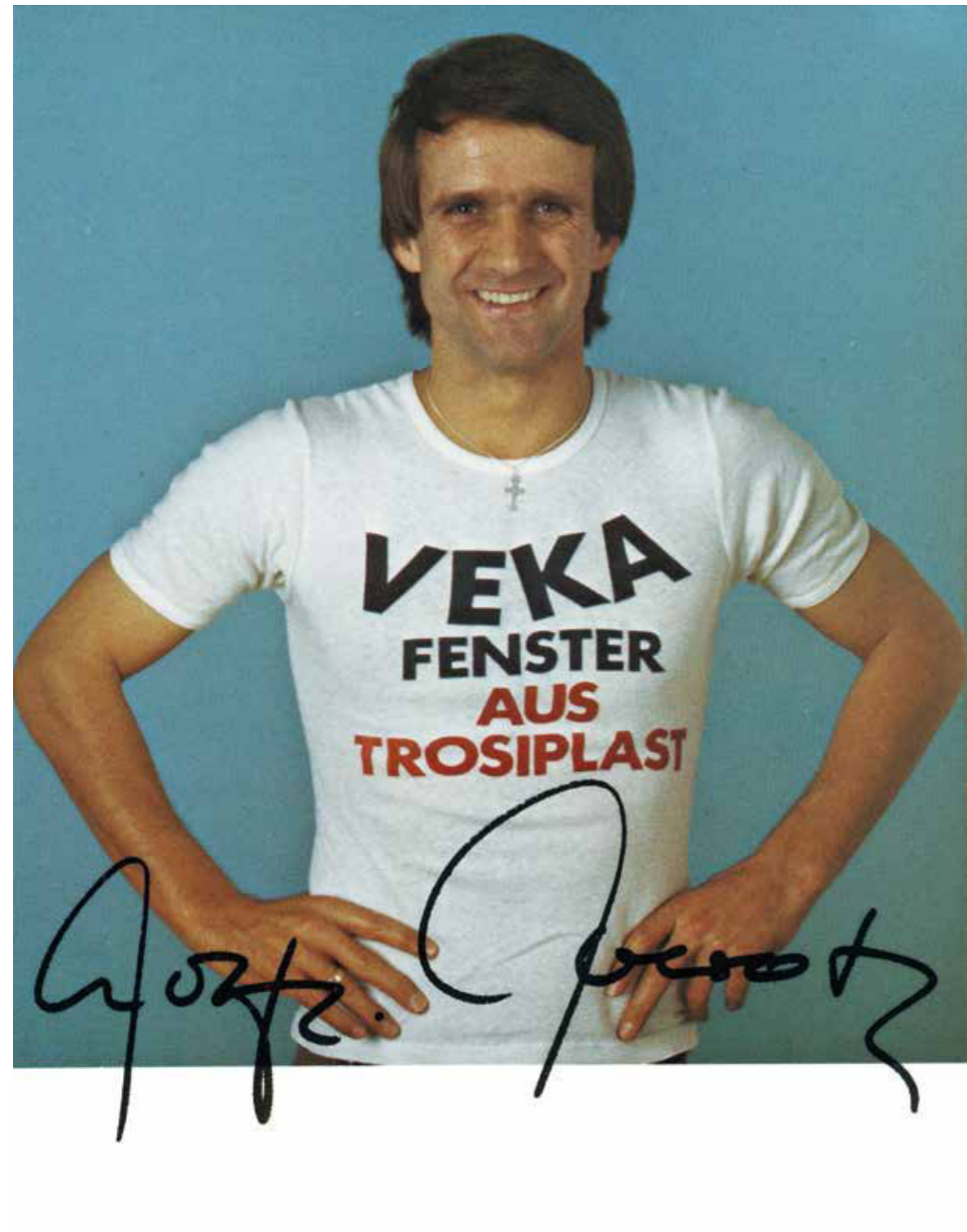
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From 1977 on, Wolfgang Overath, part of the World Cup-winning German football side of 1974, became a very public brand ambassador for VEKA windows.

Plastic frame epiphany

An introduction to profile system manufacturing

As time went by, Heinrich Laumann and his team moved towards a new area of business activity: window frames made of plastic. In this early phase, a technical drawer by the name of Dieter Koch, who had joined the company in 1969, played a key role, developing a wholly new profile system for window frames – despite the fact that he had never been involved in window production before. Heinrich Laumann was well aware of what a challenge this new development represented, and the way he parlayed the company's initial lack of technical know-how into an advantageous position stands testament to his entrepreneurial abilities. Having Koch contact a range of window manufacturers who Laumann knew from his time at Grottemeyer, Laumann charged him with quizzing them on the strengths and weaknesses of their existing profile systems: the aim, of course, was to make sure that the first prototypes were as close to customer requirements as possible. Werner Therling, destined to play a decisive role at VEKAPLAST as the plant

manager in the following years, was also able to contribute: having spent a brief period working for a window fabricators in nearby Rheda-Wiedenbrück, he had not only gained a general understanding of window-manufacturing, but specific knowledge of the system sold by competitor Kömmerling. He had also been previously employed by Ewald Venhues, the original ideas man behind VEKAPLAST, and as such, Heinrich Laumann made sure to bring him back into the company fold. This proved to be a smart staffing move.

□ Rather better than cheaper

Although, as a salesman through and through, Laumann made sure to listen carefully to prospective customers, he was also pursuing ambitious technical goals for his own products. His guiding idea was to combine the strengths of various window-making techniques into the new VEKAPLAST system: it was to be a multi-

chamber profile, but – and this is where it would differ from the competition – it was also to have the thicker exterior walls of a single-chamber profile. Although a number of profile manufacturers were already established on the market, Laumann took a conscious decision not to try and compete on low prices, gunning instead for an immediate positioning at the top of the market.

It would appear that by January 1971 at the very latest, plans to start manufacturing the new plastic profiles in Sendenhorst were taking on concrete form. Documents from the time still held by VEKA AG include a price list from ROPLASTO in Bergisch Gladbach, competitors who were already on the market with whole profile systems; moreover, in early 1971, VEKAPLAST requested offers and samples from a range of raw material producers.

It is clear that the aim was to try and find out how VEKAPLAST could enter what was, at the



A map of Europe hangs in the background underlining international ambitions and the VEKA logo, still in use today, is visible on their overcoats: even back in 1981, management knew how to look the part. Heinrich Laumann, Eugen Schlüter, Heinz Cord-Kruse, Hubert Hecker, Werner Therling (l. to r.).

Laumann offered hotdogs at his stand and, despite – in his own estimation – being devoid of any talent as dancer, volunteered to take to the stage on one of the evenings. Yet with a mixture of self-confidence, self-deprecation, and contextual humour, Laumann managed to turn the appearance to his advantage, making sure that customers and suppliers noticed him. Nevertheless, there was little immediate pay-off in terms of sales – and when a representative of established plastics competitor Kömmerling stopped by at the VEKAPLAST stand, Laumann had to play the diplomat, as he himself recounts:

“Mr Anstatt, head of sales at Kömmerling, pointed out that our decision to use wooden models to advertise profiles made of plastic may well have been in contravention of trading standards legislation and that anyone so minded might decide to make our lives difficult. After all, we had tried to pull the wool over customers' eyes, hadn't we? This was, of course, little more than a transparent attempt to keep VEKAPLAST, a potential competitor, in its place, and I didn't let it put me off, replying that we only had one extruder in Sendenhorst in any case and so, if we didn't manage to make a go of the window profiles, they'd probably be able to buy our equipment at a knock-down rate. That quietened things down.”

It would in fact take at least a year until VEKAPLAST was able to state that it had finally “assembled all of the tools required to start production of our window system”. As machining partners for ramp-up, Laumann

time, a relatively new segment of the market. In summer 1971, a series of experiments was carried out with various formulas of plastic, extrusion tools, and extruders, and for a newcomer such as VEKAPLAST, hitting on just the right combination of profile design, extruder, tools, raw materials, processing temperature and production speed early on would have been the equivalent of winning the lottery. Instead, the experiments continued: with some of the plastic granulates, it transpired, the edges of the profile would snap if the extrusion temperature was too low; excessive heat, however, led to distortions and, in some cases, burned materials. Another issue was that only a small number of the plastic mixes offered by suppliers in Germany worked well with the extrusion tools, which had been made in Italy.

□ “Plastic window frames” from the joiner

Despite the fact that there were still considerable obstacles blocking the path to series production, Laumann started advertising them, taking his wife Rita along with him for practical and moral support as he went on sales trips: at R 71, a trade fair for roller shutters in Stuttgart (today called R+T), VEKAPLAST presented a mock-up of the new profile system – made of wood by Mössing, a joiner in Sendenhorst, as not one single model had been successfully extruded by the time the expo started. The orders didn't exactly come flooding in: anyone who so much as tapped the prototype would have noticed that it was nowhere near manufacturing-ready; what is more, VEKAPLAST was completely unknown as a maker of window profiles. In order to try and generate interest, experienced salesman

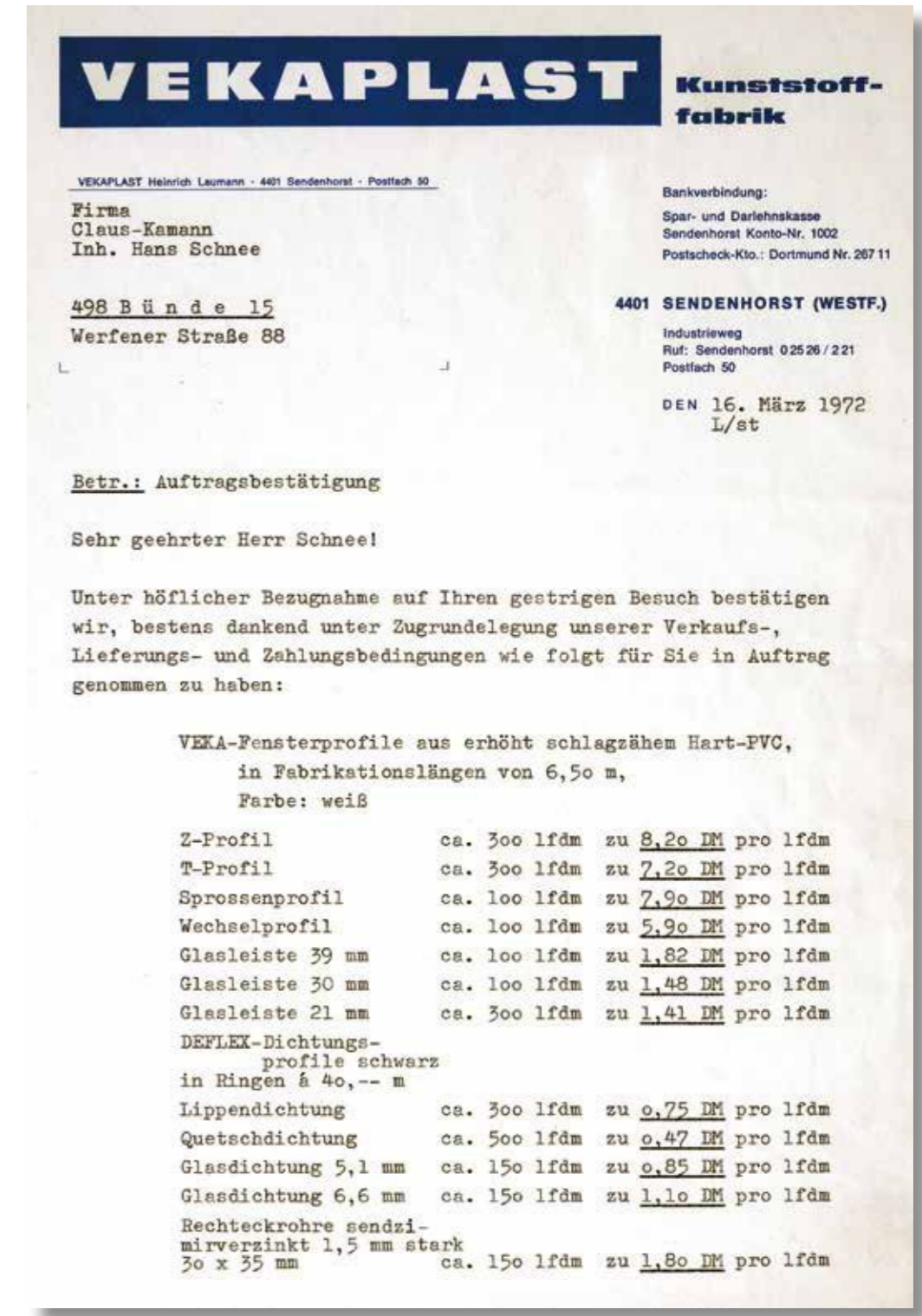
The first order confirmation dating 16th March 1972. 950 metres of profiles were sold to Claus-Kamann in nearby Bünde.

decided to use Hans Weber of Kronach, which supplied VEKAPLAST with a twin-screw extruder; as against the single-screw extrusion equipment used in the plastics industry, the twin model provided a more homogenous mixing of raw plastic granulate. Meanwhile, tools for the VEKAPLAST window profiles came from the Italian manufacturer Oleotti. Despite tough negotiations on price, Dynamit Nobel AG of Cologne was selected to supply plastic as its Trosiplast brand formula was a particularly impact-resistant form of PVC extrusion material which was simply best suited to the technical requirements in production; one clear advantage of Dynamit Nobel products, for instance, was that they were supplied as granulate while many other companies offered PVC primarily as a powder which was more difficult to handle. Moreover, VEKAPLAST made a clear decision in favour of barium-cadmium stabilisers as they were more weather resistant than the alternatives which, at that time, generally used lead; as a result, even after years of exposure to the elements, VEKAPLAST frames remained bright white.

□ The first order

On 16th March 1972, VEKAPLAST confirmed an order placed by Claus-Kamann from Bünde, further east in Westphalia, for around 950 metres of T-profiles as well as various ancilliary profiles.

The order was worth 8,113.00 DM and, more importantly, it was the first time a window





The first VEKAPLAST factory in Sendenhorst, 1969.

fabricator was using the profile system developed by VEKAPLAST in Sendenhorst. Today, with VEKA's production capacity of 200 metres per hour, an order like this would be little more than a footnote, but at the time, it served as proof that around three years of development and preparation had not been for nothing: as such, it's not surprising that the order confirmation document has been framed and still hangs in the VEKA headquarters. Nevertheless, the sales model VEKAPLAST was pursuing following its entry into window profile production was quite different to the approach VEKA applies today. Hubert Hecker recalls:

"Back when I joined VEKAPLAST as member of staff number 28 in 1973 – the company was still at the old site on Industrieweg – we still sold complete windows; or rather, to be more specific, we had window fabricators across the region using our profiles to make their windows. We would then take the finished windows and sell them on to makers of roller shutters as a way of getting them interested in PVC-windows, which were a new product at the time. This was just a phase, though, as our

focus quickly shifted onto selling semi-manufactured products."

The change in strategy was the obvious response to the conflict between wanting to sell both finished windows and profiles to window fabricators, which made VEKAPLAST a competitor to its own customers. By opting to focus on semi-manufactured profiles rather than finished products, the company chose the more scalable business: due to the fact that customers need someone to fit them, windows tend to create a strongly regional market structure; profiles, however, offered nationwide and even international sales potential. In order to pursue this avenue of growth, of course, it was essential to get as many window fabricators as possible to use VEKAPLAST profiles – an initiative which was hindered by the teething difficulties the company was still experiencing with the new product range. The rubber seals, for instance, which VEKAPLAST bought in from a supplier, didn't fit, either hanging so loosely that they might fall out of the profiles or too thick to actually be inserted into them at all; in some

cases, the excessive tension caused by the seals made it impossible to shut the windows. It took some time for it to become apparent that, more than any great technological difficulty, it was a communication issue between the supplier and the VEKAPLAST application technicians: the suppliers had been working to outdated drawings from Sendenhorst, for instance; moreover, VEKAPLAST had realised that, before moving to series production, it would have to submit its profile prototypes to comprehensive tests, ensuring that they were both functional and suitable for installation. It had become clear that there was no other way for the company to reach its stated aim of being the market leader in quality.

□ Quality profile – or low profile?

As such, VEKAPLAST had begun applying a range of measures to reduce the error quotient in its production runs. From early 1974 on, VEKAPLAST extrusion profiles were marked with the name of the machine operator, the number of the machine, the date, and the pro-

"Having once started life as a cooper for wine and cider barrels, in 1971, our family business started producing plastic windows. It was my father's idea, and we soon came across the innovative VEKAPLAST profiles. We had a long, productive, and friendly business relationship with Mr Schiller and, after he retired, continued on the same path with the VEKA regional sales representative, Mr Wiebe. In our experience, if problems crop up on the horizon, VEKA doesn't wait around, but rather tackles them head-on in a can-do way: they don't let paperwork get the upper hand. Our companies have a lot in common: the courage to be innovative, a strong focus on quality, and a feel for coming trends in the industry. Going forward, I am confident that we will continue to share these values – and continue to be successful together."

Martin Gugelfuß jun., Managing Director of Gugelfuss GmbH, Elchingen

In 1973, VEKAPLAST began offering courses in window fabrication for existing and prospective customers alike.

duction batch; this made it easier to trace the cause of any defects in the event of complaints. In October 1974, a dedicated position for quality assurance was created and the year previous, VEKAPLAST had started offering courses in window fabrication for existing and prospective customers during which they could try the company's profiles. Continuing down this road, in 1975, VEKAPLAST set up a technical customer service desk in order to offer support to customers having difficulty using the products, and this range of measures helped to cement VEKAPLAST's reputation as a quality provider – contributing, however, to a considerable increase in production and overhead costs. This put price pressure on VEKAPLAST, as the following note on a file from February 1975 shows:

"In the market for roller shutters to date, we had to deal with competition from cheap profile manufacturers (even market leaders) – and this tendency applies to window profiles, too. [...] We don't want to fight price wars, though, and will keep trying to uphold our list prices. The way to do this is to put the quality of our





The management team in 1985, from left to right: Eugen Schlüter, Hubert Hecker, Heinz Cord-Kruse, Heinrich Laumann, Werner Therling, Werner Gövert.

products and the outstanding technical concept behind them into the foreground."

Overall, VEKAPLAST had every reason to be proud of how far it had come. Since 1969, sales had been rising steeply year on year, and even a comparatively "weak" performance like in 1974, marred by cheap competition, especially from Italian manufacturers, and a drop in building activity in West Germany, still saw the company add 23% to its turnover; in 1972 (+42%), 1973 (+30%), and 1975 (+45%), sales growth was considerably higher. What these numbers show is that VEKAPLAST's expansion was almost entirely untouched by the increase in materials costs for PVC in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis; in fact, in the long term, VEKAPLAST actually benefited from the fact that many construction companies and other businesses began to look at how to reduce their heating costs, becoming increasingly willing to invest in better building insulation – including plastic-frame windows.

VEKAPLAST's strong growth in the first half of the 1970s was almost entirely thanks to its window profiles, and by 1974 at the latest, the roller shutter business was in decline – not least since the field sales force was increasingly concentrating on window profiles because, given their higher level of technological complexity, they offered higher prices and higher margins. Moreover, the blinds division was beset by quality issues – an issue which Horst Scheibel, the top salesman at VEKAPLAST at the time, put in no uncertain terms in January 1975:

"The overall feedback from our customers about the R 52 and M 40 roller shutter profiles is scathing. [...] If we are unable to produce a genuinely fault-free VEKAPLAST roller shutter profile for the very high prices we demand, then it would be advisable to stop trying and concentrate fully on window profiles, instead."

□ Shutter business rescued

Even though VEKAPLAST's owner, Heinrich Laumann, acknowledged the difficulties in roller shutter profile production, he refused to completely give up on this part of the business, instead embarking on a lengthy rescue. This kind of far-sighted, patient management approach was eventually rewarded as, from 1977 onwards, sales of roller shutter profiles began to increase again; today still, this product group – the company's eldest – continues to contribute to overall VEKA sales.

Nevertheless, the shift in focus away from roller shutters which had begun with the first generation of VEKAPLAST window profiles was never reversed. Quite to the contrary, in the mid-1970s, PVC-frame windows were still quite new. Soon, they were not just being bought for new-build, but also for existing properties, and VEKAPLAST intended to secure a toehold in this new segment of the market with a new range of customised products. At the German construction industry trade fair of

1977 in Essen, for instance, VEKAPLAST presented a range of combined PVC-windows and insulated roller shutters; meanwhile, the company began advertising directly to developers where it had previously focussed exclusively on trades such as joiners, window fabricators, and architects. 1977 also saw VEKAPLAST score a very notable marketing success when it managed to sign Wolfgang Overath, one of the players in the World-Cup-winning German football team of 1974 as brand ambassador. The advertising campaign with a sportsman of such national and international stature positioned VEKA windows as high-quality, high-function premium products, giving a marketing expression to Heinrich Laumann's philosophy of pursuing quality instead of entering into a price race to the bottom.

Looking at the figures, the business case for this approach was compelling: in 1972, when VEKAPLAST began selling plastic window profiles, it had a turnover of 6 million DM; only five years later, in 1977, the company had revenue of 28 million DM – i.e. had grown by



Heinrich Laumann and Wolfgang Overath at a football match against materials supplier Dynamit Nobel in Troisdorf, 1981.

377%. On 1st January 1977, it had 62 members of staff and, as it looked to hire more, it was beginning to outgrow its original site in Sendenhorst. In view of the outstanding business prospects for the whole sector, it seemed only sensible to look for a new location in the town that would allow the company to expand its production facilities as necessary; and by 1976, VEKAPLAST had begun construction on a new 65,000m² plot of land on the Sendenhorst industrial estate, Schörmel.

□ Dreaming of a mixing plant

One of the key considerations was the medium-term plan to set up an on-site PVC mixing plant. As well as VEKAPLAST's increasing raw material requirements and increases in prices for ready-mixed compound, it is safe to assume that one of the motivating factors was that the main VEKAPLAST supplier, Dynamit Nobel, only provided a two-year guarantee for its coloured Trosiplast material. This gave many other producers of window profiles a competitive edge

inasmuch as their suppliers allowed them to provide more extensive warranties, yet attempts at Sendenhorst to replace Trosiplast with other formulae had proven difficult. The remaining way around the issue was to build up proprietary competence in mixing and blending plastic compounds.

Yet extending the space available for production and mixing plants was only a part of the VEKAPLAST strategy for maintaining the dynamism of its early years. Faced with increasing competition, the company management decided to focus on strengthening its ties to existing customers: and so on 25th March 1977, on the day before the new works were officially opened, Heinrich Laumann invited many of the companies using VEKAPLAST profiles in their window fabrication to a private event held at the Sendenhorst town hall. Laumann decided to engage the roughly 250 representatives of the window fabricators who attended, some from as far afield as the south of Germany and Austria, in an open discussion about the market situation and the industry. He also offered the



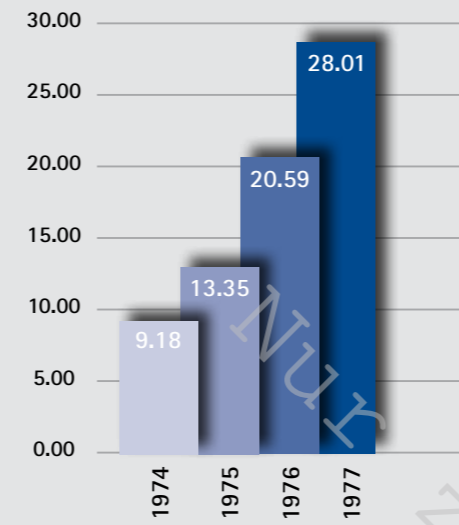
At the opening ceremony for its new works in March 1977, VEKAPLAST received publicity as a key employer in the local area.

"It was back in 1968, around a year before VEKAPLAST was founded, that dtH began producing window and door systems using PVC. At first, we bought profiles in from a company called Braas, and when their profiles business was taken over by Heinrich Laumann and his team in 1985, my father Otto Tiemann became a VEKA customer more or less overnight. As time went on, we switched more and more of our range to original VEKA profiles, with the 58mm system being one of the first.

In the intervening 30 years since the takeover, we have developed a strong business partnership with VEKA based on a deep well of trust. There are lots of friendships between people in our two companies, both at management level and among other members of staff, something that was particularly apparent at a TEC conference when there was a game of boccia in the VEKA Technikum. This kind of thing shows just how close our companies are to each other."

Dirk Tiemann, Managing Director dtH Tiemann GmbH, Hille

VEKAPLAST turnover figures in DM millions



representatives from chemicals companies and even some of our competitors have said that we offer a very well-designed and perfectly extruded window system [...]. That explains the unparalleled success VEKA windows have enjoyed, growing from 0 to 5,000 tonnes of window profiles produced annually in just five years. That is a feat which no other manufacturer of window profiles in Europe has achieved."

It almost sounded as if Laumann, who had skirted bankruptcy in the early days, could himself barely believe the meteoric rise of his company – whose advertising, nevertheless, showed no signs of self-doubt. "Once and for ever" was the slogan chosen for VEKAPLAST window profiles in newspaper adverts from around that time.

companies supplied by VEKAPLAST his assurance that any technical and logistics issues would be dealt with, that a range of best practices for how to finish and how to process and install VEKA windows would be compiled, and that VEKA would look into how it could support the companies in their marketing. It was, in essence, an unmistakable promise to keep developing good customer relationships.

As well as looking forward, however, in a speech to those present, Laumann also wanted to offer his guests a short retrospective of the impressive journey VEKAPLAST had completed in just a few short years:

"Dear customers and partners, working with you and your colleagues [...] we have been able to gain a reputation both in Germany and across Europe as a provider of an outstanding window system. Manufacturers of fittings,



The BASIS system was the earliest VEKAPLAST series of profiles with an installation depth of 58mm and rebate seal. At first, all products were white, but from the mid-1970s onwards, brown and black versions started to make their appearance.