

Jens Schöning

Taking Care of Quality

He doesn't want to be a policeman. Jens Schöning sees himself as a coach – one that helps others to deliver the best quality day in, day out. He doesn't seem the pedantic type, greeting his visitors with a warm smile and boyish charm, not a jacket and tie. The 49-year-old is in charge of Quality Management at Continental's Commercial Vehicle Tires division in Hanover, a division whose staff have long had the reputation for pointing fingers around the company.

This is something that Mr. Schöning has experienced for himself. From 2007–2009, he was in charge of the commercial vehicle tire factory in Illinois, USA. His factory came under scrutiny from the global quality management arena, and there was cause for concern. "I don't like losing," he says with a laugh, "not even at board games." He reacted quickly, shook up factory processes, increased employees' individual responsibilities and made sure problem areas were regularly followed up. And it worked. During the next audit, the praise the Illinois team received outweighed any criticism.

The chemical engineer, who also studied rubber technology while still working, learned two important things from his experience at the factory: you only get quality when everyone cooperates, and that works best when employees recognize problems themselves and develop measures to resolve them. "Quality managers used to be the ones checking if everything in the factory was running as it should be," says Mr. Schöning, playing with his glasses. "Today we help colleagues on site to continuously improve." The key, he says, is prevention – making sure no faulty tires are made in the first place.

Naturally, Quality Management is still interested in faults, whether in tires, intermediate products, or manufacturing processes. Employees used to only do spot checks. Today, every single tire is checked at every step right up to the finished product. And because nobody can see through rubber, tires are also X-rayed. Every X-ray is still checked visually – for now. Jens Schöning explains: "We have also increased our use of digital checking systems, which reveal deviations even more reliably." The Quality Management head even sometimes checks tires himself. "We have to be consistent," he stresses. "It's the only way we can keep our quality promise."

Of course, some quality issues don't come to light until the tires have already done a lot of mileage. "We've established an early-warning system," says Mr. Schöning. In addition to various internal indicators, the system collects feedback from the market received by customer service departments worldwide. "Using tools like these, we can now take early action and rectify issues, should any become apparent."

But even the most polished technology cannot replace talking to the customer. Mr. Schöning meets with customers every year. During one visit, a customer complained to Mr. Schöning about a tire he was unhappy with – a tire he'd bought and had problems with over ten years ago. "Our customers are business people; they have a very good memory." If our image is tarnished by a faulty tire, it takes a long time before trust is regained," says Schöning. This is why it is so important to him that every tire which leaves a Continental factory fulfills strict quality requirements.



Quality managers' duties are growing as fast as Continental is. Machines have to be upgraded, quality standards reworked and staff trained. If additional product lines are opened, or even new factories, the whole process is observed and improved. "The very first tire that goes onto the market has to meet with requirements in full," says Mr. Schöning.

It is this ambition which drives the quality experts: tires are both ordinary, everyday products and high-performance products. "From the outside, they're just black and round. But even commercial vehicle tires with 2–3 meter circumferences depend on an accuracy of a tenth of a millimeter in some cases." International competition is huge, and the cheapest tires – or the best – achieve the best sales. And top performance equally means consistently high product quality. In the case of commercial vehicle tires, guaranteeing quality is by no means easy. Requirements vary from region to region: in Saudi Arabia, tires work in 50-degree heat and at high speed on asphalt; in the U.S.A. they are used in waste collection on sharp-edged surfaces; and in some countries they carry far more cargo than perhaps recommended. Every complaint not only costs time and damages the company's image; it also affects customer satisfaction. And Jens Schöning wants happy customers, both externally and internally, because one thing is clear: the customer is king.