Interview series "Hidden Champions"

"Our Customers Have a Strong Focus on Reducing CO_2 Emissions"

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CEO Mathias Dülfer reveals in the interview which business areas he sees particularly high potential in and why modular product strategies play an important role for Gebr. Pfeiffer.

Since 2018, Mathias Dülfer has been the CEO of Gebr. Pfeiffer SE. Gebr. Pfeiffer SE, headquartered in Kaiserslautern (Germany), is a leading company in the development and manufacturing of grinding plants and technologies. Founded in 1864, the company is renowned for its solutions in material processing, particularly in the areas of cement, coal, lime, gypsum, and ceramics.
(Image: Gebr. Pfeiffer SE)

Mr. Dülfer, what do you understand by a "hidden champion"?

Mathias Dülfer: For me, a "Hidden Champion" is a company that leads in its niche, often even being a global market leader, but does not stand in the spotlight of the general public. These companies are characterized by their innovation and technological leadership. They are usually medium-sized enterprises that, although not as well-known as large corporations, still significantly influence their industries. Hidden Champions are extremely successful in their niche and drive the industry forward through advanced technologies and efficient processes.

In the industry, Gebr. Pfeiffer is certainly seen as a "hidden champion." Would you agree with that?
Dülfer: Yes, I would completely agree, and perhaps at Gebr. Pfeiffer, we are even a classic example of a Hidden Champion. Our strength lies in our specialization and technological leadership in the grinding and processing of building materials such as cement, lime, and gypsum. An impressive example of our technical capabilities is our MVR mill. With heights of 30 meters (approx. 98 feet) and a drive power of up to 18 megawatts, it can grind up to 600 tons of cement or 1,000 tons of raw material per hour. Our machines and systems are particularly energy- and cost-efficient. With innovations such as the Multidrive drive technology, we have always opened up new technical possibilities.

And although we do not have the media presence of large corporations, our innovations have gained recognition beyond our industry. An example of this is the nomination for the Rudolf Diesel Medal last year.

Innovation and change are essential today to remain successful as a global market leader. Where are you currently focusing?
Dülfer: One area where we see great potential is sustainable cement production. Given the fact that the cement industry is responsible for a significant portion of global CO_2 emissions, we have focused early on optimizing our plants in terms of energy consumption and the ability to produce low-emission cements.

We have further developed the technology of our machines and systems so that a high proportion of clinker substitutes can be used. This makes it possible today to replace up to 70 percent of conventional clinker. This not only reduces the ecological footprint but also lowers costs. Efficient and sustainable cement production is further supported by our digital products. Among other things, we have developed an AI tool that optimizes mill operation even further.

Especially here in Germany and Europe, we have numerous projects where sustainable cement production is the driving force. Our customers have a strong focus on reducing CO_2 emissions—and see the possibilities to achieve this with our technology.

One could say it's a challenge, but also a huge opportunity. Where do you currently see other relevant challenges?

Dülfer: One challenge we have to deal with is our globalized market combined with geopolitical uncertainties. As a company with an export share of over 95 percent, Gebr. Pfeiffer is deeply rooted in international markets. However, this global presence also brings risks in times of political instability and trade conflicts.

Geopolitical tensions can quickly lead to uncontrollable trade barriers, such as tariffs and disruptions in supply chains, complicating access to certain markets. For us, this means that we must always remain flexible to respond quickly to such changes. We are continuously working on diversifying our international supply chains and developing alternative procurement strategies to reduce dependencies and ensure supply security.

At the same time, it is necessary to closely monitor developments and markets and adjust our business strategies accordingly. This also includes investing in strategically well-located sites to mitigate potential risks.

Can you name an example of such a location?
Dülfer: A good example of such a strategically advantageous location is our latest investment in Pune. India is currently one of our largest markets. By establishing our own manufacturing facility on site, we can better meet the needs of the local market and reduce our dependence on individual supply chains. Additionally, we benefit from logistical and cost advantages through local production.

Gebr. Pfeiffer still produces, among other places, in Germany. Will that remain the case?
Dülfer: Germany remains our central location—and for good reason. Our engineering expertise and innovative strength are rooted here. Additionally, it provides us access to skilled professionals and a strong network of technology partners.

Our manufacturing in Germany also enables us to respond quickly and flexibly to customer requirements. This is particularly valuable for the supply of spare parts to our customers. Additionally, we offer third parties the machining of large parts and the casting of small and micro series in Germany. We value the stability and infrastructure that this location provides, even though production costs are higher than in other parts of the world.

Speaking of customer demands: How do you reconcile the various requirements from around the world?
Dülfer: A key aspect is our modular product strategy. The approach is to cleverly cover all requirements without constantly having to design new machines or special solutions. There is no "one size fits all." However, through a modular system principle, we can offer cost-efficient and timely customized solutions. The prerequisites for this are: one must understand the market, the differences, and especially the commonalities well.

There still remains a part that must be implemented specifically for the customer. However, this part should not be larger than necessary, as one-off developments are expensive and hardly economical.

To conclude, the question: What's next for Gebr. Pfeiffer?
Dülfer: We are investing in the "mining" sector, specifically the grinding of ores such as iron and copper ore. A large amount of water is currently required in this area, which we can significantly reduce with our dry grinding technology. Building such a new business field doesn't happen overnight, of course, and it is an investment in the future.

Development doesn't just mean making what you have always done a little better. Certainly, we do that too, and we have recently filed patents again in our traditional field. For us, development means exploring new technologies and approaches to be successful in the markets of tomorrow. This includes, among other things, the "mining" sector.

Thank you for the interview, Mr. Dülfer.