



# European News

## BERNER Group Remains on Track for Success

Driven by the strong mobility sector, and strong double digit growth in eCommerce, BERNER Group has made a successful start to its current first half of



2023/2023 financial year, with the family run business realising sales of €581 million – a new history sales record. In the core business Omnichannel Trading, the Group increased sales by around 5% to over €548 million with the brands BERNER and BTI by BERNER. The Mobility segment made a significant contribution to this, with the B2B specialist recording turnover growth of 8% in the first six months of the current financial year. The company also remains on the road to success in international key account management, where both existing contracts were extended on a long-term basis and attractive new major customers were acquired.

The core of BERNER’s business model is personal consulting with 5,500 sales specialists on-site. Despite difficult conditions in the recruitment of specialised staff, BERNER Group has succeeded in increasing the number of its sales representatives by 4%. At the same time, BERNER Group is increasingly expanding its alternative sales channels. In countries such as France, and Luxembourg, tele-sales, depots, eProcurement, etc, already account for over 40% of total sales. In the first half of the current financial year, the Group once again achieved strong double-digit growth in eCommerce. The share of online trade in the BERNER Group has thus risen to a good 17% overall. In an increasing number of business units (including Italy, France and Benelux) at least one in five euros comes from the Internet.

The European and, above all, the German political framework conditions have massively curbed demand in the construction sector. The combination of excessive regulation and ecological ideology, together with the energy and inflation/interest rate crises, is impacting the construction industry to an unprecedented extent. In the automotive sector, the hasty and isolated focus purely on eMobility is leading to a massive manufacturing and sales crisis. The inadequate energy policy is having a massive impact on the production of raw materials in the chemical industry and is drastically worsening production conditions.

“In view of the generally difficult conditions, I am extremely proud of the performance that my team has achieved in the first half of the year. We are still doing well here and are therefore currently still one of the profitably growing players in our industry,” states Christian Berner, CEO at BERNER Group. “The fact is, however, that we are fighting against a massively collapsing market. The economic situation in Germany, and Europe, is extremely dramatic, while international competition is advancing mercilessly. We are threatened by a deindustrialisation tsunami – with serious consequences in terms of prosperity and employment. The current left/green political orientation in Germany and Europe is also jeopardising social peace and social cohesion.”



## Karnell. Chequered Flag Falls on Plalite’s Sale to Karnell

Karnell has acquired 92.5% of Plalite’s shares with an option for the remaining stake in 2026. The minority shareholders will stay active in the company post-sale, with Darren Cordell and Tony Bess remaining for a handover period. A precision engineering company whose customers include a Formula 1 team, Plalite Ltd, based in Sittingbourne, Kent, was founded in 1968 and its core business is CNC machining to support the aerospace and motorsport industries – from its purpose-built 1,300m<sup>2</sup> site.

Darren Cordell and Tony Bess, directors of Plalite, decided to sell the business in preparation for their eventual retirement, and strong interest resulted in eight offers being made, which were split between trade and investment acquirers. The successful buyer was Swedish-based Karnell Group, which specialises in owning market leading industrial technology companies, primarily in the Nordic region.

“We look forward to developing Plalite through the new collaboration with Karnell,” said Darren and Tony. “They have shown a good understanding of our business and see the same potential as we do. Karnell has solid experience in the field within the group that we believe we can learn from.” Petter Moldenius, CEO of Karnell, added: “We are impressed by Plalite’s technical knowhow and robust customer relationships and are convinced there is great potential to continue growing with customers in selected segments who value Plalite’s qualities.”

In acquiring its 11th company, the UK represents a new venture for Karnell. “In addition to the current focus on the Nordic markets, Karnell has analysed the opportunities for growth in the UK for some time and can conclude it has yielded results,” explained Petter Moldenius. “We are convinced our model, with a long-term ownership perspective and willingness to invest in our companies with a clear growth ambition, should be able to attract successful companies and entrepreneurs to join Karnell.

### Insulation Screws for ETICS and Aerated-concrete Applications

A new high-quality, die cast zinc screw, featuring a pre-mounted EPDM seal, and specifically designed for direct fastening to insulated facades, has been launched by international fastener and fixings maker CELO.

CELO states that the new IPSZ insulation screw is versatile and compatible with all common types of insulation and offers optimal performance when secured through standard 8mm through-holes. The company reports that the screws are also ideal for installing light loads, such as wall-connection profiles, plinth-protection strips, signs, or lamps on insulated and plastered façades. They can also be installed directly in ETICS and wood-fibre insulation without pre-drilling – due to the sharp drill tip of the screws, in turn saving time. The new screws include two different lengths in order to cover a wide variety of insulation materials. The IPSZ 80 screw, for example, offers secure holds on ETICS-insulated facades of 80mm thickness and with materials including EPS, mineral wool, polystyrene foam boards, rigid foam boards or polystyrene boards. The IPSZ-H 55, on the other hand, is the shorter version and suited for use with wood-fibre insulation boards and perimeter insulation of 60mm thickness.

CELO also points out that the IPSZ screws are energy-efficient, as they prevent thermal bridges and the penetration of moisture into the façade. In addition, their TX drive ensures good power transmission with the right bit size and means they can be installed with a standard cordless screwdriver. Their pre-mounted EPDM sealing ring also means that no subsequent sealing is necessary, thus reducing the amount of insulation steps required on a job. The strength, durability and corrosion-resistance of the new IPSZ screws is also ensured through their zinc die-cast construct.



## HEICO

### HEICO Wins Industry Award

Nominated in the category 'Connection Technology', HEICO Group recently competed in Vogel Communications Group's annual awards – with its HEICO-LOCK® combi-washers, for the sustainable securing of bolted joints, being announced as the category winner. For 8 years, the Vogel Communications Group has been honouring new and innovative product developments in 24 different categories. Companies who take part in the award will face the most demanding jury with their products – the specialists and users in the industry. Over a period of 5 months, people from the industry were allowed to vote for the nominated products of the nominees. As a manufacturer of bolt locking and pre-tensioning systems, HEICO Group competed in the 'Connection Technology' category with its HEICO-LOCK® combi-washers, which effectively and sustainably secure bolted joints against self-loosening. Based on the wedge locking principle, the two-washer locking system prevents bolts from loosening due to vibrations and dynamic loads. Small tabs on the plastic inner ring of the washers enable them to be easily attached to any conventional bolt and thus prevent washers from slipping off the bolt shaft. This allows the user to pre-assemble bolts and bolt locking device and thus have both hands free for the correct assembly of the components. A significant advantage, particularly in difficult installation situations. This ease of use, and fact that the HEICO-LOCK® combi-washers can be combined with any type of bolt, apparently also convinced the industry.

The celebratory award ceremony, to which the top 3 companies in each category were invited, took place on 7th December 2023, at the Vogel Convention Center in Würzburg, Germany. The award for the best product development in the category 'Connection Technology' was gratefully received by Jan Bernd Heimann, CEO of HEICO Group – who attended the ceremony together with Tobias Grobe, head of sales & marketing and Frank Lutter, head of the R&D department. On accepting the award, Mr. Heimann said: "We would like to thank everyone who voted for our HEICO-LOCK® combi-washers. However, my special thanks go to our employees, who work day after day with a high motivation and a great spirit of innovation to develop and manufacture our products. This award not only recognises an innovation but is also an appreciation of a strong team behind a strong product."

## BULTEN

### Fastener Maker's Indian Odyssey

Bulten AB is establishing manufacturing operations in India through a newly formed joint venture company, Bulten Radium Industries Private Ltd. This is being undertaken alongside two partners – Radium Fasteners Private Ltd and ZJK Precision Parts HK.

Anders Nyström, president and CEO of Bulten, explains: "Our ambition is to increase sales, primarily of micro screws, to companies in the electronics industry. India is a growing market for this segment, as many international manufacturers of electronics are locating more and more of their Asian production in India."

The operation will be based at a new production plant currently being constructed in Jamnagar, in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The aim is to be fully up and running during the second quarter of 2024, with about 50 employees. The building will be leased by Bulten Radium Industries and, therefore, involves only limited investment costs for Bulten, which has a 51% stake in the newly formed JV company. For its part, ZJK has previously been a partner to Bulten in the manufacture of micro screws in China, while Radium is a newly formed company owned by experienced players in India's fastener industry. As well as the new joint venture, Bulten also operates in India through its recently acquired distribution company, Exim Mfr & Enterprise.

## Norma Profits Buck Sluggish Trends

NORMA Group has achieved stable profitability despite sales decline in the third quarter of 2023, with group sales totalled €297.1 million and were 6.7% lower than in the same quarter of the previous year (Q3 2022: €318.6 million). Sales were down 1.5% from July to September 2023. Guido Grandi, CEO at NORMA Group, commented: "We delivered a solid performance in the third quarter despite a sluggish market environment. Although our business volume was mixed, we still managed to achieve a sound level of profitability. With our 'Step Up' improvement programme, we continue to focus on increasing our operational efficiency and leveraging new market opportunities in the areas of mobility, industry applications and water management."

In the EMEA region (Europe, Middle East and Africa), sales in the third quarter of 2023 were almost exactly in line with the previous year at €119.3 million (Q3 2022: €119.9 million). The slight decline of 0.5% is due entirely to negative currency effects. Sales development was stable. Sluggish economic development in both the automotive industry, and industry in general, dampened demand for joining technology in the third quarter of 2023. In the Americas region, sales in the third quarter of 2023 fell noticeably by 12.4% year-on-year to €132.9 million (Q3 2022: €151.7 million). Sales were down 5.6% in the period from July to September 2023. Negative currency effects had an additional negative impact of 6.8% on sales. Strikes at US vehicle manufacturers from mid-September affected customer call-offs to an unexpected extent, while demand for general industrial applications was also lower. The water management business, on the other hand, recovered after a difficult first half of 2023 and recorded slight organic growth compared to the same quarter of the previous year.

In the Asia-Pacific region, sales amounted to €45 million in the third quarter of 2023. Sales grew by 7.6%. Business volume grew particularly well in the area of joining technology for battery cooling systems and other vehicle applications. Due to negative currency effects of 12%, the quarter saw an overall decline of 4.4% compared to the same period of the previous year (Q3 2022: €47 million).



### Improvement Programme Creates Additional Market Opportunities

NORMA Group continues to implement its 'Step Up' programme to enhance growth and operational efficiency. To date, more than 300 initiatives have been identified worldwide and around 20 of these have been successfully implemented. In terms of growth, for example, new products have been launched and existing products have been expanded to additional countries or customer groups. In terms of efficiency, production processes have been optimised or production equipment adapted at various locations. The reduction in production backlogs resulted in improved product availability for customers. NORMA Group launched the five-year 'Step Up' programme in May 2023 to ensure long-term profitable growth.



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## New Managing Director at Bülte Plastiques France

In order to maintain the continuity of the new generation at Bülte Group, following the takeover by Fanny Bülte – the granddaughter of the company's founder, it is now the turn of the French company Bülte Plastiques France to develop its management team, with Florian Kmyta being appointed managing director as of 1st January 2024.

Florian Kmyta has been at Bülte Plastiques France for several years and was trained by Mr. Stefan Bülte himself before gradually taking on responsibilities within the company. He initially started out as a sales apprentice and quickly developed his technical and commercial skills to become sales director. During his many years with the company, he was given the opportunity to take a master's degree in management thanks to his hard work and perseverance. He has also been the driving force behind the company's attractive sales policy for the last eight years, alongside Fanny Bülte.

Florian Kmyta, who shares the values of the family business, will help to drive Bülte's success in providing a global offering of solutions – developed to meet the needs of all its customers. "Our team is able to work closely with customers to develop bespoke solutions that meet the specific application requirements. We can also advise customers on the best manufacturing solutions to meet their needs and help them to choose the right raw material for their project," explains Florian Kmyta.

Bülte offers a wide range of plastic components and fasteners, such as plastic screws, nuts, washers, spacers, custom moulded parts and more, which can be used for various industrial applications. "In our business it's important to be flexible and listen to customers' expectations: every day we reshape our strengths and adapt them to new opportunities." Florian emphasised.

## Würth Industrie Service High-bay Warehouse on Target for April

With the excavations having started back in July 2022 to build a new automated high-bay warehouse for Würth Industrie Service,



including 59,000 additional storage spaces covering more than 4,000m<sup>2</sup>, the company is now firmly set on commissioning the new facility and machines in April this year.

The Würth Industrial Park in Drillberg, Germany, is considered one of the most advanced logistics centres for industrial supply in Europe, with over 65,000m<sup>2</sup> (equivalent to about nine football fields) devoted to the secure supply of production resources, as well as auxiliary and operating materials, for around 20,000 customers. The park offers modern, fully automated, high-bay and shuttle warehouses with a capacity of more than 650,000 storage locations, which include 34km of conveyor system, autonomous bin shuttles, camera inspection systems, as well as self-learning robots. All of this has the goal, according to the company, of ensuring optimised workplace ergonomics, as well as a sustainably healthy way of working – by taking over physically stressful tasks through this increased level of automation and digitalisation.

In order to ensure the long-term supply security for all customers across Europe, and to support its growing product range of currently 1.4 million items, Würth Industrie Service is constantly investing in further warehouse capacity expansion. With its new high-bay warehouse, which is 50m high, 34m wide, 121m long, it has expanded its capacity by 59,000 additional pallet-storage spaces – increasing the overall high-bay capacity at the Drillberg, Bad Mergentheim location by about 33% to 235,000 pallet storage spaces in total. With its silo-type shelving system completed, three of six SRMs have been brought in. Over an aisle length of 120m, the rail-guided vehicles will now take over the fully automated storage and retrieval of pallets in the warehouse. They will operate in six aisles with a maximum travel speed of 180m/min and a lifting speed of up to 70m/min. Each SRM has two telescopic forks as load handling attachments, with a total load capacity of approximately 2,400kg. The 46m high SRMs are particularly economical on space thanks to their single column design, and can carry out up to 600 pallet movements per hour, using their two load handling attachments.

The SRMs are from Kardex, an expert in the field of intralogistics solutions and leading provider of automated storage solutions and material flow systems. Lars Wagner, project manager, operations new business refurbishment at Kardex MLOG Logistics, explained: "In a project of this magnitude, it is always impressive to see so many experts with a wide range of expertise acting as one big unit in the shortest possible time. In order to safely transport the SRMs from Kardex's production site in Neuenstadt am Kocher to Bad Mergentheim by heavy goods transport, a total of three 55m long trucks were used to get them to Drillberg. With the utmost precision, the crane operators steered the 22.5 tonne machines over the 'still open roof' into the new high-bay facility. At a height of 100m, it was truly precision work for all those responsible."

With the construction measures being currently implemented and planned, Würth Industrie Service is taking significant steps to ensure seamless supply for its customers in the future, as well as consciously contributing to sustainability targets. How this works in the case of SRMs is that the SRMs power consumption is optimised by means of DC-link coupling, which can divert the energy between two drives intelligently and efficiently. This means that the energy saved by the lift drive during lowering can, in turn, be used for the travel drive. The quality Kardex SRMs are robust, durable, and require minimal maintenance. Another contribution to sustainability is the greenhouse gas neutral energy supply to the machinery, with the south façade of the new high-bay warehouse being equipped with a large-scale photovoltaic system of solar panels, with an initial total output of 1,028kWp, but which is intended to achieve an eventual total output of over 2,000kWp, as well as a generation volume of around 1,500,000kWh, that can be applied across the whole Würth Industrial Park. ■

