

FORUM

The Stieglmeyer-Group's company magazine



From beds in the car boot to our vision of care in the future

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Ralf Wiedemann has spent his career from apprentice to managing director of domestic sales at Stieglmeyer – and in these 40 years has experienced numerous exciting chapters of technical, economic and political development. In an interview with FORUM, Mr. Wiedemann explains how the company has repeatedly recognised the signs of the times and provided a good service for people in need of care.

Managing Director Ralf Wiedemann has helped shape 40 years of Stieglmeyer history

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Mr. Wiedemann, how did you choose Stieglmeyer in 1978?

It all started on 1 August 1978 – as a trainee industrial manager. My grandmother on my father's side still worked for Stieglmeyer at that time, my grandfather had worked here, and my other grandfather was with the Bundesbahn federal railway, but also had dealings with Stieglmeyer there. I come from Herford, so it was an obvious choice. I sent a written application to Managing Director Dietrich Tabelander, who was in charge of training at the time, and he hired me.

What happened then?

After my apprenticeship, I did my basic military service with the Federal Armed Forces, but as usual at that time, I still remained employed in the company. Then I joined the sales department as a clerk. The fact that everything worked so well back then is down to my colleague Mrs. Krömker. She actually wanted to retire, but stayed a few months longer so that I could become her successor after I left the Federal Armed Forces. That was a good start. Until 1984 I worked as a clerk for the South German region. There was only one other

person there who dealt with Northern Germany – that was what "lean management" looked like back then. In 1984, I took over field service in the Ruhr area and northern Hesse.

Did you move away for this post?

No, because Herford was conveniently located in the middle of my patch. Stieglmeyer had geographically cut the old Federal Republic into slices. One colleague lived in Hamburg and looked after Schleswig-Holstein and East Friesland, another looked after the strip from Emsland to Harz, and my district stretched from Emmerich to Eschwege.



At trade fairs Mr. Wiedemann appreciates the exchange with the customers.



Bright colors were a must on many units in the 70s and 80s. The hospital bed series "Euroform Color" impressed since 1973 with shades such as banana, corn and Mirabell.

The large trade fairs MEDICA, ALTENPFLEGE and REHACARE play an important role for the Stieglmeyer-Group today and especially for colleagues in the field sales force. What was it like 30 years ago?

At that time, Stieglmeyer went to the trade fairs Interhospital and FAB (Trade Exhibition for Hospital Equipment). These were huge events for us, where we had up to 500 square metres of space. There was no open communication area like we have today back then. Instead, the customers were led for individual discussions into private booths with curtains. We had up to 15 such cabins on the stand, in which six people could sit down. However, there were problems when looking for a certain employee in a cabin, because nobody had a mobile phone then. Someone had to put their head through all 15 curtains and say "excuse me, excuse me" everywhere. So, later we all had a name tag which we could attach to the entrance with Velcro. The Interhospital trade fair has not been around for a long time. After German reunification, the organisers made the mistake of fixing the location to only take place in Hanover, but visitors, particularly those from the new federal states, preferred to travel and get to know new cities. Instead, the rise of the ALTENPFLEGE trade fair by Vincentz Verlag began in 1990.

In 1989, shortly before German reunification, Stieglmeyer acquired the Burmeier company in Lage. What was this all about?

Burmeier produced dining room furniture at that time and was also supposed to manufacture chairs for Stieglmeyer. But after reunification, there was suddenly a huge need for beds with wooden surrounds and

bedside cabinets in East German care homes. So, Burmeier became a supplier of wooden elements for our plant in Herford. When long-term nursing care insurance was introduced in Germany in 1994, the supply of beds for home care changed: Instead of the welfare services, the health insurance funds and the medical supply stores were now responsible. To win these partners over with a fresh new beginning, Burmeier became a home care brand. This decision proved to be very successful.

Your time in the field sales force ended in 1994 as well.

Yes, in 1994 I moved to sales management. Rolf Siekmann, then sales manager at the time, had two employees. One of them became ill, the other got married and moved to join his wife's company. When Mr. Siekmann asked me, our second daughter had just been born, and the move to the internal sales office was a perfect fit. I told my wife at the time, "In internal sales, I won't have to work in the evening anymore." She still holds it against me today as it turned out to be a fallacy.

What happened after that?

As sales group leader, I was first given power of attorney, later procurement. The next change came in 2004, and again it became apparent that changes in our industry are often significantly influenced from the outside through political upheavals. In 2004, the introduction of flat rates per case in hospitals led to a paradigm shift. Whereas it had previously been quite advantageous for hospitals if patients stayed longer with their fixed daily rates, the flat rate was more likely to result in speedy discharge. During this time of upheaval, many hospitals skimmed on bed purchases. This meant crisis years for Stiegmeyer. On the other hand, things looked much better in nursing care for the elderly, which had developed considerably since the 1980s. That is why we then decided to clearly separate the divisions so we could focus more on the care division. The entire team from field service to management was split between Clinic and Care, and the Care team moved into the Burmeier building in Lage. I became managing director of the care sector. This restructuring also proved to be right at the time, as Stiegmeyer rose in Germany from at most the third-largest to the top-selling provider in the care sector.



Care beds with wood decors came on the market during the 1980s. The Stiegmeyer model Milena from the year 2000 additionally scored with split safety sides.

Stiegmeyer still has divisions today, but we are one company in Herford again.

Yes, the necessities of daily life soon became apparent. In 2006, the managing director for Clinic sales left. Since the division was only just starting to recover, no new successor was hired and I took over the division instead. In 2011, I was also briefly managing director at Burmeier before Reiner Rekemeier, who had helped to build up Burmeier, took over this position. In 2014, the Care team moved back from Lage to Herford, and in 2017 the separate companies merged to form Stiegmeyer GmbH & Co. KG again. In terms of organisation, this has many advantages. We retain the specific view of the individual market segments that we gained during the period of separation, because the market situation has not fundamentally changed since then.

What is the market situation today and what developments do you envisage for the future?

The Clinic market in Germany is shrinking – not at Stiegmeyer, but overall. In the last fifteen years, approx. 35,000 beds have been removed. However, this trend has slowed down, and in view of demographic developments I do not believe that many more beds will be reduced in the future. Elderly people with

multimorbid disorders need adequate care. The fact that the population in Germany is currently stable also helps us. By contrast, the care market will grow strongly in the coming years. The interesting question is: Where will the care for the elderly take place? This is not only about the division between domestic and inpatient care, but also about completely new forms of living. We just got off the phone to a big funding agency who says: In the future, there will be many elderly people who live in private residential parks or other age-appropriate homes and who are willing to spend money on better care. A very large market is developing. The Stiegemeyer-Group is the only manufacturer in the position to offer the right products for all requirements in its Nursing Home, Comfort Beds and Homecare segments.

40 years with Stiegemeyer – what intrigued you about the company during this long period?

There have been many ups and downs, but in difficult times we have always actively developed ourselves, and everything has turned out well. The company is rock solid. I've never been paid a day late in 40 years. I stand behind our products with all my heart, because they promote the recovery of people who are ill and maintain the quality of life and well-being of all those involved in their care. Our beds and furniture are there for people in difficult life situations and help them to grow old with more self-determination and dignity. Every day we work to provide our customers with comprehensive support in their tasks. I very much appreciate the exchange with customers and their feedback. I am also committed to the positive further development of care as Chairman of the Board at the Centre for Innovation in the Health Industry OWL (ZIG) and through my work in the Spectaris trade association in Berlin. And I'm optimistic about the future: 100 years from now, sick people will still be needing beds, and we will still continue to grow old. Our products will continue to be needed right into the distant future.