

“We’re not a typical American company”



Mike Grandy is pursuing ambitious goals at “Worwag Coatings” in the United States. As president of the company, he is relying on team work and German expertise to achieve them.

By Michael Thiem; photo by Laurent Burst

Mr. Grandy, what brings a Canadian to the American Midwest?

Wörwag approached me and I was immediately persuaded by the planned investments and the path to growth that the company had embarked on. The job appealed to me. In addition, the switch suited my future plans well. I had been in Europe for nearly 20 years up to that point, and we wanted to move back to North America for family reasons. Both of my children live here, as do my parents.

You came to Wörwag from BASF. Was it a difficult decision for you?

Leaving after such a long time wasn't easy, of course. But I was very warmly welcomed by Wörwag in Stuttgart and Lafayette. I soon noticed that the chemistry was right. In a large corporation you are only responsible for one area. At Wörwag my responsibilities have many more facets.

You seem to have stood out during your first few days of work in Lafayette ...

Are you alluding to my clothing? On my third day our HR manager Connie Hollis asked if I always wore a tie. Things are generally more casual at the plant. We see ourselves as a team. That's why the tie has stayed in the closet ever since.

Your start at the company was rather turbulent, largely due to the winter weather. Did you have any time at all to adjust?
Hardly. The weather created big problems for us at the beginning of the year. One could say I came on board at a very challenging time. It was the coldest winter in years, down to 30 degrees celsius below zero with extremely heavy snowfalls. Raw materials arrived at the plant too late. It was too cold for anything — even for production. We couldn't make deliveries to the customers on some days. Furthermore, we had to improvise because a lot of jobs were vacant at the time.

How did you overcome the challenges of that situation?
Despite all of the complications, it quickly became clear that we would make it. We have a great team here. Whatever is on the agenda—we will take care of it. Everyone pitches in. For example, many helped with deliveries even though they were actually responsible for other duties. That came as a very pleasant surprise. It showed me that Wörwag is different.

In what way?
It's a question of character. The employees stand loyally behind the company and identify with their work. That probably stems from

MIKE GRANDY

became president of Worwag Coatings, a Wörwag subsidiary in the United States, in February 2014. Before joining the company, the Toronto native spent nearly 20 years at BASF in Europe. He has a degree in chemistry and is married with two children.

the fact that everyone feels their efforts are appreciated and acknowledged.

Can that be attributed to the fact that Wörwag is a family-owned company?
That probably plays a role as well. We're not a typical American company. Employees are not just a number. Everything operates on a very personal level here. A very pleasant situation. Here, the work atmosphere is not determined by the share price—we plan for the long term.

Wörwag is also on a course to growth in the United States. How will you reach the goals you are striving for?
We are following the European car manufacturers, who are expanding their presence in the US. There is a clear demand for increasing volume, state-of-the-art technology, the highest quality, and comprehensive customer care. We are investing heavily to guarantee all of these things.

Is it hard to provide the same quality as in Europe?
No. Our philosophy is this: the technology that we sell in the US is identical to that in Germany. The formulas for the American market are created in Germany, and R&D is based there, too. It's crucial to quality that knowledge transfer take place smoothly. Besides the formulas, the processes are the key to success.

How relevant is an intense exchange of information between the employees on each side of the Atlantic?
That is very important. American employees go to Germany repeatedly for training over longer periods of time. Or Germans come to the US to provide support. For example, we are very lucky that Angela Tschierswitz has been working here for the past two years.

“We will be aligning our thinking and actions even more with customer requirements, and that comes down to our taking the initiative.”

What is the focus in the United States?
We will be aligning our thinking and actions even more with customer requirements. That's why we are hiring additional customer service personnel. We can't wait for the customer to come to us—we are the ones that have to take the initiative. When European manufacturers expand into the United States, we will be ready. That also refers to the volumes that will be needed when that happens.

Is the US market different from the European one?
Not really, apart from the logistics perhaps. That is related to the fact that we primarily work for European manufacturers. With them we talk about calendar weeks and Celsius temperatures.

Which role does technology play in procuring contracts?
A major role. That's why we have to master as many different processes as possible. We are still considered newcomers in the integrated painting process, but we are on top of it. We are trailblazers in the conversion from organic solvent-based paint to water-based paint. Both will become increasingly important when European manufacturers award contracts. We are thoroughly prepared for that. ■