

Bernard stakes its claim

Revisiting Bernard after a five-year absence, this editor was curious to see if the goals of growth that Bernard had set for themselves had been reached. The answer is a resounding yes. As the president of the company, Mr Etienne Bernard, explained in a frank interview: "We have transformed an internationally exporting company into a global group serving the actuator market throughout the world".

By David Sear



100% service duty Bernard actuator mounted on a DN900 modulating valve. Photo Courtesy Metso Automation, division Field Systems.

There is a saying in business that standing still is the same as going backwards. This certainly cannot be applied to Bernard, the well-known manufacturer of electric actuators, which has been implementing carefully orchestrated growth plans for a number of years. Having developed from a family business to an international company by the turn of the century, Bernard has continued to grow with turnover up by a massive 50% since the year 2000. "There is no magic secret behind our success," opens Mr Bernard. "All we do is understand and then fulfil customers' expectations. We create and manufacture products that people will want to use. Today, Bernard is a group comprising eight separate companies, providing worldwide reach. Wherever the market, we are one step ahead of the business." These eight companies, comprising both manufacturing and sales, provide global coverage for Bernard's key markets: water and environment, oil and gas, power generation, and industrial applications and shipbuilding. Mr Bernard: "Whatever the

customer's needs, we have an electric actuator to suit. Be it a standard or a special, with ATEX certification or according to NEMA standards, for use in arctic climates or the desert, we make rugged items that are built to last."

Investing in Europe

Picking up the story, Industrial Director Mr Hervé Leroy indicates that a strength underpinning Bernard's growth is undoubtedly its focus on product competitiveness. Explaining, he says this means ensuring products have the right blend of features, price and delivery times. "That calls for on-going investments in all areas. Recently, for example, we have rounded out our flagship Intelli+ range whilst the capacity of our engineering team has been enhanced with new staff and highly advanced design software. Changes have also been implemented in production: machining is now concentrated in our plant in Grandvilliers, France, whilst the factory in

Gonesse, close to Paris, takes care of assembly and testing. As one result, we have shaved manufacturing times for specials from twelve to around eight weeks."

Bernard is also making carefully considered use of outsourcing opportunities. "We ensure we retain complete control over actuator design and quality, focusing for example on machining where we can add value," says Mr Leroy. Giving an example, he notes that the internals of the electric motors are designed in-house, but then outsourced to a low cost volume manufacturer. However, Bernard retains some winding capability in-house, to ensure fast deliveries where engineered specials are required.

Assembly workshops have also been established in the USA and China. Mr Fichtenberg, Sales and Marketing Director: "This is an increasingly global market so we have boosted our facility in Houston to better serve customers in North and Middle America. The recently inaugurated Beijing office now boasts an assembly facility that

as a global player



By including data logging capabilities in its first generation of intelligent actuators, Bernard was at the forefront of automated maintenance.



Bernard's recently inaugurated Beijing office now boasts an assembly facility that runs to the same high standards as the one in France. Sales and Marketing Director Mr Fichtenberg notes that whilst each facility is geared to the needs of the local market, they can all pull together to when extra capacity is required for large orders.



Thanks to the clever design, Bernard's fail-safe electric actuators are now used world-wide for oil & gas safety applications.

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One area of investment that may come as a surprise is the level of expenditure in France. The Gonesse plant, for example will soon be expanded even further. In reply, Sales Manager Europe Mr Thierry Toulza comments: "We certainly don't believe that Western Europe is finished as a manufacturing base. Nor is it a market in decline regarding sales. Of course you won't find any plans for world-scale refineries, but there are opportunities if you are prepared to look for them. In France, for example, the construction, heating and ventilation sectors are flourishing, whilst environmental applications are big in Germany. On a larger scale, gas pipelines and power plants are also being built across Europe, including some nuclear facilities in Finland and France. These are all very interesting to us." Another group of European clients include the engineering com-

panies and valvemakers. Mr Toulza: "Without doubt, many of the world's projects are still financed or engineered from the West, so we receive plenty of orders from say valvemakers in Italy and Spain. In many cases, our actuators are then re-exported as parts of larger packages."

Persuasive

Although Western Europe continues to offer growth potential, Bernard's managers expect sales here will be eclipsed in absolute terms by regions such as South America and Asia. Reflecting this potential and its own growing stature as a world player, Bernard recently created four key sales areas around the globe. These give end users even more direct access to Bernard's products and expertise. Responsible for the Middle East is Regional Manager Mr Gerry Cleverley. "The Middle East is a much more varied market than you might imagine. Certainly there is a strong oil and gas sector, but there is also a flourishing construction industry, for example, as well as desalination projects.

Bernard has the scope of product to meet such varied needs. Moreover, we carry stocks here to meet those clients requiring quick turnover, and we know we can rely on our flexible manufacturing chain to service world-scale projects."

Confirming that actuators are not items that can be sold from a catalogue, Mr Cleverley says he spends much time working to train sales staff as well as all distributors and agents. "Our focus is to teach them what to sell, not how to sell. Another aspect of my job is training local service companies to install, commission and maintain our actuators. In fact, their solid performance over the long term is often the most persuasive form of selling that there is," he comments.

Projects worldwide

Getting close to customers and understanding their needs is the real key to being successful, according to Marketing Manager Mr Fabien Lemaître. That's why he is especially happy Bernard's networks in the Middle East and elsewhere are shap-



Bernard regularly welcomes international visitors to its headquarters at Gonesse, keen to learn more about how actuators can enhance plant operations.

ing up nicely. Giving some examples of recent projects served, he points to the 400(!) actuators supplied to a geothermal plant in Russia. "These actuators had to be suited to modulating service at Kamchatka. Another complication was the high level of hydrogen sulphide in the atmosphere, so the components used in the actuator needed to be manufactured in adapted materials to avoid excessive corrosion. With our skills, it was relatively straightforward to come up with alternative materials."

Another demanding sector includes LNG tankers. In fact, Bernard has long been a firm supplier to global LNG fleets. As electrical equipment is not permitted on deck, the company successfully utilised pneumatic and hydraulic systems to provide motive power. Mr Lemaître: "Our actuators are used in areas such as the loading and unloading of LNG tankers. We've been doing this since the seventies and this is still a booming market. It's nice to see that as many first-generation tankers require refurbishing, the owners call on us

to fit them out with the latest generation technology. They have seen we make products to last, with special coatings designed to withstand the harsh marine environment. Moreover, we help accommodate the short delivery times. In fact, one of our people recently spent several weeks on board two tankers, commissioning actuators whilst they sailed on their shuttle runs."

Mr Toulza contributes a project example from the Libyan desert where robustness and reliability are definitely in demand. Here, some 1400 Bernard actuators have been installed on water-well skids. "This is actually aggressive water, requiring resin-lined butterfly and globe valves for protection. Despite the harsh environment, I'm pleased to say we have only been called back once since the project was completed - and that was to train additional staff how to use our actuators."

Mr Lemaître continues by saying that in many cases the actuators are not sold as 'stand alone' items. "Bernard is seen as an expert in areas such as control systems

and in providing interfaces, linking the valve to the plants process systems. Recently, for example, we worked closely with a valvemaker and the end user to provide a turn-key system based around quite a special valve." The valve in question was a DN900 ball valve, fitted with anti-cavitation trim, and required for modulating service. The actuator had to have a 100% duty rating given the long operating times between the fully open and the fully closed positions. "This was a challenging application, also on account of the high level of precision specified and the required torque of 150,000 Nm. This again highlights one of Bernard's strengths. Whatever the client's needs, we are there to help him out," concludes Mr Lemaître.

Fit and forget

As Bernard has so much expertise in house, it is a natural to question to ask Mr Bernard what technology clients want to see in an actuator. "To be honest, clients simply want to get a reliable and long lasting product, simple to install and set up.



Following investments at its assembly and testing plant at Gonesse (close to Paris) Bernard has shaved manufacturing times for specials from twelve to around eight weeks. Mr Bernard confirms that further investments are planned, in part to support Bernard's strong sales in Europe.

FACTS & FIGURES

Name:	L.Bernard SA
Headquarters:	Gonesse, France (Paris area)
Manufacturing sites:	Europe: Gonesse and Grandvilliers (France) Americas: Houston (USA) Asia: Beijing (China)
Distribution:	Subsidiaries and offices in Belgium, China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Spain, Thailand, UAE, USA. Distributors in over 30 countries
Products:	Electric actuators (quarter-turn, multi-turn, modulating, failsafe, intelligent controls, fieldbus connection, additional gearboxes)
Quality certifications:	ISO9001-2000, CSA, GOST-R, GGTN, CE, NEMA, ATEX, Germanischer Lloyd, ABS, IEEE, RCC-E, ...
Main applications:	Thermal & nuclear power, oil & gas, water treatment, industry automation, shipbuilding.
Main clients:	End users, engineering companies, valve manufacturers, systems integrators
Sales:	EUR 30 million in 2004
Employees:	220
Website:	www.bernard-actuators.com

However, more and more users realise the operational advantages of using data which can be retrieved from the actuator to improve preventative maintenance for their valves. Industrial users are also looking for a supplier who will think along with them during the specification stage, provide communication interfaces adapted to their systems and be on hand should service become necessary."

Bernard clearly has all the elements in place to meet these needs, says Mr Bernard. "We have the right product, we understand our customers and we are definitely committed to growing our share of the electric actuator market. That's where our core competence lies, so there are no plans right now to diversify into say hydraulic or pneumatic lines."

As a prelude to further growth, Bernard has recently appointed an internationally experienced Financial Director, Mr Jean-Marc Lignères. Ties have also been sought with financial backers. Mr Lignères: "Whilst the Bernard family retains majority ownership, which enables us to respond

quickly to market changes, some shares have been sold to a European bank. This institution fully supports our plans, so finance is readily available. For example, if the right opportunity arose, I would not rule out an acquisition to gain market share."

Bernard's aim is to double turnover, concludes Mr Bernard: "Today, we are perhaps number four in global terms. I want to be in the top three soon. Customer relations are the key to that. Our customers tell us they value our manufacturing and applications expertise. They also know that actuators with a Bernard name tag give good returns over the lifetime of the product. And we will continue to innovate: for example, there are areas in commissioning where we believe we can save significant sums for our customers. So whether they need standard or intelligent solutions, commodity or engineered actuators, small volumes or bulk orders, customers can rely on Bernard as their reliable, long-term and global actuation partner."

New products for the building automation

Bernard has launched a new range of small quarter-turn actuators for use in the HVAC, greenhouses and equivalent applications. The products' technical specifications are in line with the expectations of this market and the quality of the design reflects Bernard's long experience and capacity to innovate.



plug & play :

- integrated electronic control
- torque limiter
- self-locking final gear
- adjustable mechanical end stops
- torque protected manual override