

Fear for the Chinese art of copying

A trade mission from the two Limburg's and the Aachen region, recently visited China to explore the fast growing market, and to get into contact with entrepreneurs. Archi Leenaers, director-owner of instrument manufacturer Anatech from Sittard (The Netherlands), was also part of this delegation.

Paintings of some twenty employees are hanging on the wall. They are made by Francesco Pistolesi, a painter from Barcelone. "A heritage from my predecessor, the founder of Anatech", denotes Archi Leenaers (42). Pistolesi was his son in law, that's why the paintings are there, Leenaers wants to say. He decided to continue the remarkable tradition, but new portraits are seldomly seen. There are hardly new employees coming. Furthermore, Pistolesi constantly changes his email address and provider, which makes him untraceable. "We have therefore not been able to make any new painting", he apologizes.

Anatech is in more than one way a remarkable company. The employees are facing a sculpture garden with a fish pond and here and there some fruit trees. Leenaers: "My employees have to feel at home here, I want to create an atmosphere where they can be creative." That is why a piano stands in the corner of the small cantina. Here we sometimes have a drink and make music. Many people that work here have a passion for music. One is for instance a composer and the other an opera singer."



Leenaers took over Anatech four years ago from the founder, a former DSM-employee who was not satisfied with the laboratory instruments he worked with and started to improve these instruments at home in his shed. Leenaers too has his roots as physicist at DSM, but could eventually not settle in the company. That is why he changed jobs, and finally in 2001, with the financial help of the regional investment bank LIOF, he succeeded in buying Anatech. "I did not get it cheap, but there was a click."

Anatech creates instruments to test materials, such as small injection molding equipment to test plastics and gas metering stations to be able to test samples under equal circumstances. Very high quality equipment, where only a few hundred a year are made and sold. Anatech does not sell under its own brand, but directly to other instrument manufacturers. "We are not known to the greater public, but in that world we are pretty famous", Leenaers says.

Anatech is with 22 employees a small company. The exact earnings are not communicated, but from his mimics these are likely to be sufficient. Leenaers wants to double the turnover of the company in the coming years. To reach this he does not want to be a nameless supplier, but also sell under an own brand in as well as Europe, the USA and the Far East.



The most recent trip to China therefore should be seen as an attempt to explore the market, he explains. For now he does not want to produce there. To dangerous, he reckons. "They copy everything when they get the chance, and I did not plan to show them our secrets." Despite all this, after speaking to entrepreneurs and branch-organizations he still sees opportunities. "China is in need of high quality test equipment for a reasonable price." That is why he is playing with the idea to ship devices with a proven track record on performance after a fundamental revision to the Far East. To his own surprise: "I originally went there to sell new products."

Still Leenaers stays realistic. "I will not put my cards on China. The country changes so rapidly. I do not know if there will be a market for my products in five years. China is a bulk market. Chinese people think in big numbers. They rather sell 5000 products with a small margin than a few hundred of our products with a large margin."

A company tour immediately clarifies what Leenaers is meaning. Mass production is hard to find at Anatech. Here and there employees are working on complex technical equipment: mini injection molding devices to test the characteristics of plastics, small extruders to mix plastics in small amounts, test equipment for materials. The prices of these instruments vary from 2000 euro to 70.000 euro, per type between 50 and 100 pieces are made, tells Leenaers. "Milling and sawing is not

something you will see here, we buy all 4000 components in near proximity. We only develop, assemble, test and package.”

But Leenaers does not mask that the strength of the company is also its weakness. “We make very special instruments for not more than six customers worldwide. That is a big risk. We want to grow to about twelve customers. If from those one or two are from China I am satisfied. That is why I will be returning shortly to that country to further explore the possibilities.”

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Photo: Rob Oostwegel

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