A UNIQUE BASELINE IN THE LOWLANDS

Sokkia European Headquarters

Twenty-five years ago, in 1982, the Japanese Sokkisha Company founded its European headquarters in the Netherlands, first in Weesp and then in Almere, a city erected on land reclaimed from the sea. Marketing, warehousing, distribution, service and training for the European market are all done here. But most remarkable is the presence of a baseline for testing EDMs, 2,300 metres long and free of any obstruction - and that in a country as densely populated as the Netherlands. Reasons enough for a visit.<P>

The Dutch have never enjoyed an abundance of natural resources beneath their feet. In the late fifties a huge reservoir of natural gas was discovered, but simultaneously came the closure, one by one, of twelve coal-mines. The last, Oranje-Nassau I, in 1974, having been in service since 1899. So that the national economy has for a long time relied on agriculture and international business, and today the Netherlands is home base to many multinationals such as Shell and Phillips. In the Golden Age the Dutch multinational “Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie” (VOC, 1602-1798 AD) was the first western company to establish a trading post in Japan in 1641. And today the Netherlands not only accommodates the European distribution centres of Sokkia, Topcon and many other Japanese companies, but also one of the largest ports in the world, Rotterdam, with major transits to Germany, France and Eastern Europe. Its many logistic companies are highly experienced in handling a constant flow of goods all across Europe. The friendly Dutch tax system has even enticed rock bands such as the Rolling Stones and U2 to make their base in the Netherlands.

Seabed Town

Driving to Almere one crosses an old embankment, once built to protect the land against the sea but since 1932 forming the banks of Lake IJsselmeer. Around the year 1970 dikes and mills were built round part of the lake, resulting in the Flevopolder. On the former seabed there arose brick by brick a new town. So, about 1976, Almere came into being. Here, in the second-floor entrance hall to Sokkia Headquarters, Ramona Brongers, PR & communication executive, points out a mark on the stairwell wall, ‘This would be the water level without the dikes. If the embankments failed your car in the car-park would be submerged under a few metres of water.’ She introduces Jan van der Weijden, managing director of the company. ‘We distinguish four geographical areas in Europe, covering 34 countries,’ says Jan. ‘North-west, South, East and Russia as far as Vladivostok, where the instruments arrive along the route from Japan to Almere. Vladivostok; imagine the distances they travel!’ Each area has its own sales- and service-centre, all co-ordinated from Almere. The turnover of our European activities is approximately 25% of the worldwide turnover of the company, and still rising,’ Jan proudly affirms. ‘R&D is mainly concentrated in Japan but receives strong feedback from all local service-centres. The production units for total-stations are mainly based in Japan, the GPS equipment comes from Canada; levels and the more simple total-stations are manufactured mainly in China.Luckily, we have not yet encountered problems concerning violation of copyright on our products. Only our smallest level instruments turn up in all colours, with all kind of brand names.’ Jan is looking forward to the results of the merger with Topcon; to date the outline of the new organisation is still being drawn up and it is not yet clear whether Topcon and Sokkia will survive as brand names. Creative employees are posting on clipboards their suggestions for new names. Splitting up the two, each consisting of six letters, and reassembling the syllables results in a variety of proposals: Topsok, Sokcon, Conkia and Soktop.

Customs Free

In the Marketing Department documents are prepared to accompany shipments throughout Europe. ‘The European Community has made it possible to slash paperwork, and having one currency, the Euro (€), is a blessing,’ comments Ramona. The department also takes care of the translation of manuals into all European languages. There may be no more encounters with customs officials at state boundaries and one currency covering almost the entire continent, but there remain dozens of languages. ‘Some countries even have three languages, such as Belgium with Dutch, French and German,’ Ramona remarks, as we walk towards the warehouse, a hall of 2,200m2filled to the ceiling with racks. All are packed with boxes just arrived from Japan or ready to be shipped all over Europe. One is filled with manuals. Besides boxes for big instruments, there are also 20,000 small to very small boxes stored in two, 8-metre high paternoster chests of drawers. Scanning the barcode of a part produces the correct shelf reference. The warehouse is a customs-free area; goods in transit don’t have to be imported into the Netherlands and exported out again.

Service and Training

Next to the warehouse is the service-centre, territory of Gerben Wolsink. Surrounded by collimators, he explains, ‘This part of the building has extra foundational piles to ensure the stability necessary for testing instruments.’ A variety of electronic testing devices are lined up. ‘Here we test and calibrate instruments and train and support our local dealers; if a dealer can’t repair an instrument we fix it, and if we can’t, nobody can.’ As manager for service and training throughout Europe Gerben Wolsink knows as no other how attitudes of surveyors differ across Europe. ‘In the north-west one treats instruments very carefully and follows the instructions exactly. For example, in Finland old but well-maintained instruments are still in daily use, while in southern countries, such as Spain, instruments regularly undergo hard encounters with the ground. Instruments shipped to Russia seldom return to the service-centre for routine services or check-ups.’ The marketing department meets similar differences in human behaviour across Europe, so that advertising campaigns need to be customised separately for each and every country. We return to the discussion on instrumentation. Gerben, ‘One of the most remarkable instruments in our European market history is the B2 level instrument. Reputed to be very reliable, it became an instrument upon which European surveyors heavily depended. Sometimes the serial number tells us that an instrument has been imported before its official appearance on the European market. The set B series of total-stations, the LP 31 series of lasers and the SDR 33 data recorder had similar impacts.

Initially, we did not foresee the success of motorised total-stations, which caused a drop in market share, but with the recently introduced series we are back as front-runner.'

Unique Baseline

Indicating a tribrach-mounted column facing a small window with a view onto a baseline for testing and calibrating EDMs, Gerben extrapolates on this important feature. 'When we moved to Almere in December 1990 we were one of the first companies to settle in this industrial zone, providing us with a unique opportunity to negotiate permanent free line of sight over long distances to create a baseline. The baseline is 2,300m in length. We marked the track by driving into the ground 25-metre piles with and equipped them with reflectors on top, and the municipal public works authorities in Almere maintain the line, trim the trees, mow the grass and enforce a no-parking zone at crossroads. In close co-operation with NMI (Netherlands' Standards Laboratory), distances to the reflectors were determined to an accuracy ofwithin a tenth of a millimetre. Compared to the Delft University of Technology baseline of 50m and the one in Hungary (860m), ours seems endless!'

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