Polish Market Online

Velux. Towards active homes

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“Poorer access to credit brought down interest in real estate. This bore down h ardest on developers, who mostly use flat roofing. The slump was much milder in private construction. People still want to build homes and are eager to make maximum use of roof space for accommodation purposes”, Lidia Mikołajczyk-Gm ur, Managing Director at Velux Polska Sp. z o. o., tells “Polish Market’s” Jerzy Boj anowicz.

Q: Why did your company decide to become one of the main sponsors of the COP15 Conference in Copenhagen?

A: This gave us the opportunity to turn attention to the fact that European construction could be a very important energy-saving factor, especially considering that buildings consume up to 40% of energy. So diverse innovations could contribute to saving energy and cutting CO2 emissions. At the conference we also outlined our own low-energy construction concept.

In our pavilion, Velux House, which doubled as an exit from the conference grounds, we showed modern-day solutions for cutting energy and energy generation in buildings. Velux House is built as a module. Similarly to its predecessor Velux Soltag, it is an example of a construction technology that can be used for ecological superstructures on existing buildings. Also, Velux was one of the organizers of Energy Tours for conference delegates, during which they visited the recently-completed, zero-emission Green Lighthouse, a college building constructed with the help of Velux architects in cooperation with the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and Copenhagen authorities. Green Lighthouse is notable for its original architecture and, most importantly, its neutral CO2 emissions. This was made possible by specially positioned windows and solar collectors which heat water to aid the thermals system, as well as solar cells which produce electricity. Velux participated in the Bright Green Expo exhibition on December 12-13, during which the COP15 participants were shown measures that have been taken to appease climate change. The presented projects (among them the Soltag building) entailed diverse ecological solutions for the construction industry.

In Denmark we have built two active buildings from metal which not only save but also produce energy. Such buildings are very user-friendly as they guarantee lots of daylight. Their windows equal 40% of their floor space, which is quite a lot. They are also equipped with solar collectors, solar cells and thermal pumps.

Our experience and research show that windows can be an energy source and not, as to date, a source of energy consumption. Windows can have a positive energy balance, however this depends on the location of the building, technologies used, and climate. Such "self-sufficient" construction is supported by th e EC. In keeping with a directive draft currently past its first reading all buildings erected after 2020 will have to use such technology. Of course such buildings cost more, but there will surely be an incentive system – tax reliefs or credit funding. O n the other hand, such investments pay off as the thermal costs incurred by the collectors are recouped in only a few years, but their lifespan is much longer.

Q: What has Velux undertaken to reduce CO2 emissions?

A: Our new climate strategy foresees a 20% CO2 reduction by 2012 and a 50% reduction by 2020. For this aim we plan to invest almost EUR 54 million in energy-saving technologies.

About 95% of our CO2 emissions result from production. Here our reduction measures are mainly focused on lowering energy consumption by our machines. Already today Velux makes use of CO2 reduction possibilities, we also plan to improve energy consumption in several areas: we want to start heating our production halls with wood chippings which are a side-product of our window production, we will also use compressed air to optimise the work of the pumps which collect the chippings, and we intend to improve our compressor systems. Around 5% of our emissions are generated by Velux commercial units and our administration. Also here we are planning to optimise energy usage: we want to start monitoring energy-saving levels, we will also promote ecological travel, effective paper usage and other environment-friendly initiatives.

At the close of 2008 an energy audit took place in a plant in Poland. Experts inspected all the technological processes and compiled a 90-page report in which they suggested ways to reduce CO2 emissions by 1,000 tons annually. Among others they proposed the installation of a chip-fuelled furnace, optimised chip collection (which saves 320 tons of CO2 annually) and the application of

compressed air (150 tons of CO2 annually). Our main project is the chip furnace, which will cost DKK 20-25 million. It will help save 5,000 – 6,000 tons of CO2 a y ear.

Q: You've been with Velux almost since the company's beginnings – almost 20 yea rs. What would you name as milestones in your career?

A: Most certainly the development of our attic windows. In Poland attics usually served to store diverse bric-a-brac, we showed that they can be adapted for living or work space.

Another milestone was the promotion of the Velux trademark, which is a known brand today, and the launching of production in Poland. Our first plant opened in Gniezno in 1998, another started in Namysłów in 2003. Between them they now em ploy over 1,300 people.

The next phase entailed energy saving and solar technology. We introduced a broad assortment of products which used cost-free and unlimited solar energy, like solar collectors and windows and outer blinds run by solar batteries.

Q: Why did you locate your plants in Poland and what do you produce here?

A: The main reason was the rising markets in Poland and neighbouring countries. The location is good, close to Germany. This was important as a large part of our produce is sold to western Europe. Another deciding factor was the friendly attitude shown us by local authorities in Poland.

Each of our two Polish plants specialises in something else. Both meet all the standards binding in our company – ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 quality certification a nd OHSAS 18001. The manufacture window elements, from which they make complete windows.

Q: How would you describe your company's position on the Polish market?

A: Competition is high in every branch. As a global leader we want to be best and

develop new solutions. And the competition drives us to step our efforts up, not only in terms of production but also regarding innovation and promotion.

We are a company with a very long, almost 70-year tradition. We have commercial missions in 40 countries and plants in eleven countries. Velux Group employs 10,000 people. We are also quite strong in Poland – our two plants j ointly employ 1,300 people. Poland is a very important market for Velux.

Q: You have been elected Businesswoman of the Year 2009. Your CV says you "pave the way for innovative products in Poland". What kind of products are they?

A: To a great extent I owe my title to our employees.

Earlier on I spoke about solar energy products. Our range includes remote-controlled products by other makers. In order to market them, we and other European producers developed an "io-homecontrol" system in which one tuner co ntrols your garage door, windows, blinds, heating, humidity etc. You can also programme, say, opening or closing windows and blinds at a specific time.

Such solutions are becoming cheaper today and there is a growing market for them in Poland.

Q: What do you think about female parity in public life? Is this also necessary in business? After all, you graduated in African studies but you head one of the leading construction material manufacturers.

A: My main degree is in economics – I hold a degree from the Warsaw School of E conomics. African studies was more of an escape from business.

I don't see major differences between businessmen and businesswomen. I also d on't believe in any regulations in this respect as I an a staunch free market s upporter. What is most important, to survive in the business world you have to want to do it, because life there demands sacrifices. In order to succeed you must believe in yourself, stay optimistic and consistently go after your goals. My career was, in fact, a coincidence. I began in 1990 as a managerial assistant and we built up Velux Poland from scratch. For a long time I handled administration and commercial matters, then I was promoted to Trade Manager, six years ago the

company made me Managing Director. I’m the only woman to hold such a high p ost at Velux Group.