

Feinmetall's fine art of service

Feinmetall has achieved year-on-year double-digit growth since 2012 by focusing on innovation and customers' needs

By Keng Jin Wen Alwyn, Lee Jia Jie,
Tan Hai Liang and Yeo Kia Hwa Arthur

THE thought of leaving one's stable job to dive into entrepreneurship in the ever fickle tech industry may sound intimidating to many individuals, but not to Sam Chee Wah, general manager of Feinmetall Singapore.

Starting as a regional repair and service centre in 2007, Feinmetall has since transitioned to a "one-stop centre" offering a comprehensive range of probe card solutions. Apart from manufacturing, maintenance and sales of probe card hardware, it has moved on to provide related training for customers as well as professionals from other industries. With a diversified suite of products, Feinmetall has positioned itself as a technology leader with an excellent reputation in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe.

With Mr Sam's dedication towards continual innovation and a customer-centric approach, Feinmetall has experienced consecutive years of double digit growth since 2012. Its rapid growth and strong balance sheet have enabled further reinvestments to boost capacity and technical capabilities. One such instance is the recent launch of a new S\$6 million, 6,700 square feet digital manufacturing facility at its Marsiling premises.

Customer-centric philosophy

One important pillar to Feinmetall's success is the strong relationship with its customers built over the years.

"Never give up on your customers in bad times and they will not give up on you when good times come," says Mr Sam. In 2009 when the Global Financial Crisis struck, the dip in global trade and customer orders forced many firms in the semiconductor industry to downsize.

Feinmetall, however, utilised the spare time and capacity to better understand customer needs through regular visits and pro-bono collaborations. With the relationships forged during this trying period, Feinmetall was able to double its revenue when the market rebounded.

In order to maintain close ties, Feinmetall makes it a point to engage customers every three to six weeks. In addition, Mr Sam and various company stakeholders have informal dinners with their key customers twice every quarter to exchange information and understand their development plans.

Feinmetall adopts a personalised sales and service approach. From organising technical seminars to offering first-hand insights on

market trends, the company goes the extra mile for its clients. This approach has helped Feinmetall win contracts with substantial players such as NXP, Microchip, ST Microelectronics, Infineon AG, and Freescale Semiconductors over the years.

Continuous innovation

Feinmetall has a strong focus on innovation. Over the years, this strategy has resulted in new products, improvement in technical capabilities and automation of manufacturing processes for increased productivity.

With the help of Spring Singapore, the company has enhanced its probe card design, manufacturing, repair, and product creation capabilities. In 2014, it successfully implemented the customisation of cantilever probe cards to better fulfil customers' requirements, resulting in a fourfold increase in sales.

To improve decision-making, Feinmetall has adopted Model Factory technologies in its new facility. It houses a control room with a dashboard monitoring system which allows real-time tracking of operations and automation of data management.

The pursuit of innovation has, fortuitously, led to new opportunities for Feinmetall's probe card business.

Commitment to employees

"If you want to build your business, build your people," says Mr Sam. This philosophy is reflected in Feinmetall's structured talent management system which seeks to develop all employees. Staff developmental needs are analysed annually and training programmes organised. For example, senior management upgrade themselves through the Advanced Management Programme, while engineers are sent for overseas training at its German headquarters to keep them abreast of the latest technology.

Feinmetall regularly reviews its human resource policy by benchmarking to the standards of multinational companies. With the employees' interests at heart, Feinmetall offers flexible working schemes which are very popular among the staff, especially those living across the Causeway.

Feinmetall is also actively involved in contributing towards the community. Over the past few years, Feinmetall has dedicated an estimated 100 man-hours per quarter to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives.

The Feinmetall masterclass

During the course of expansion, Feinmetall has found it increasingly challenging to hire locals with the relevant skill sets.

In a bid to solve this talent crunch, a



Sam Chee Wah (facing camera), general manager of Feinmetall Singapore, which provides testing for semiconductor chips. Beyond being a one-stop centre, it conducts training for customers and makes it a point to engage with them regularly.

two-phase Master Class was initiated. The first phase features a one-day session which provides an introductory overview of Wafer Testing and basic knowledge of Probe Card application and maintenance. Participants are assessed through a hands-on session and matched with prospective hiring companies.

Upon recruitment, new hires will undergo the Professional Conversion Programme (PCP) where they further acquire the necessary skills. This programme is part of the Adapt and Grow initiative which seeks to strengthen employment support for mid-career Singaporean professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) looking to make a career switch.

The second phase is a two-week course which provides in-depth training in wafer probe card application and maintenance. This intensive technical training equips hired engineers and technicians with the knowledge and skills required to be proficient with the probe card maintenance process.

Phua Sia Juak is one of the beneficiaries of Phase One of the Masterclass. He managed to secure employment with Feinmetall after being unemployed for more than six months.

Steering ahead

Feinmetall is certainly on track for further growth. It has continued its unwavering commitment towards innovation and technological enhancement through its partnership with A*Star research institute. Researchers from A*Star have been seconded to help deepen Feinmetall's technological expertise and improve its Research & Development process.

With its appetite for robust growth, Feinmetall also exercises prudence while charting its future. For the coming year, Mr Sam highlights the need for internal consolidation by streamlining current human resource practices and business processes even while it positions itself for accelerated growth.

Before plotting entry into new markets, he also prioritises improvements on service levels for existing markets through further product innovation.

With Mr Sam's foresight, Feinmetall is poised to be a frontrunner in the semiconductor industry, providing world-class service and technology solutions to its clients.

■ The writers are students
from NUS Business School



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