

Taking the lead: *Manfred Lupke*

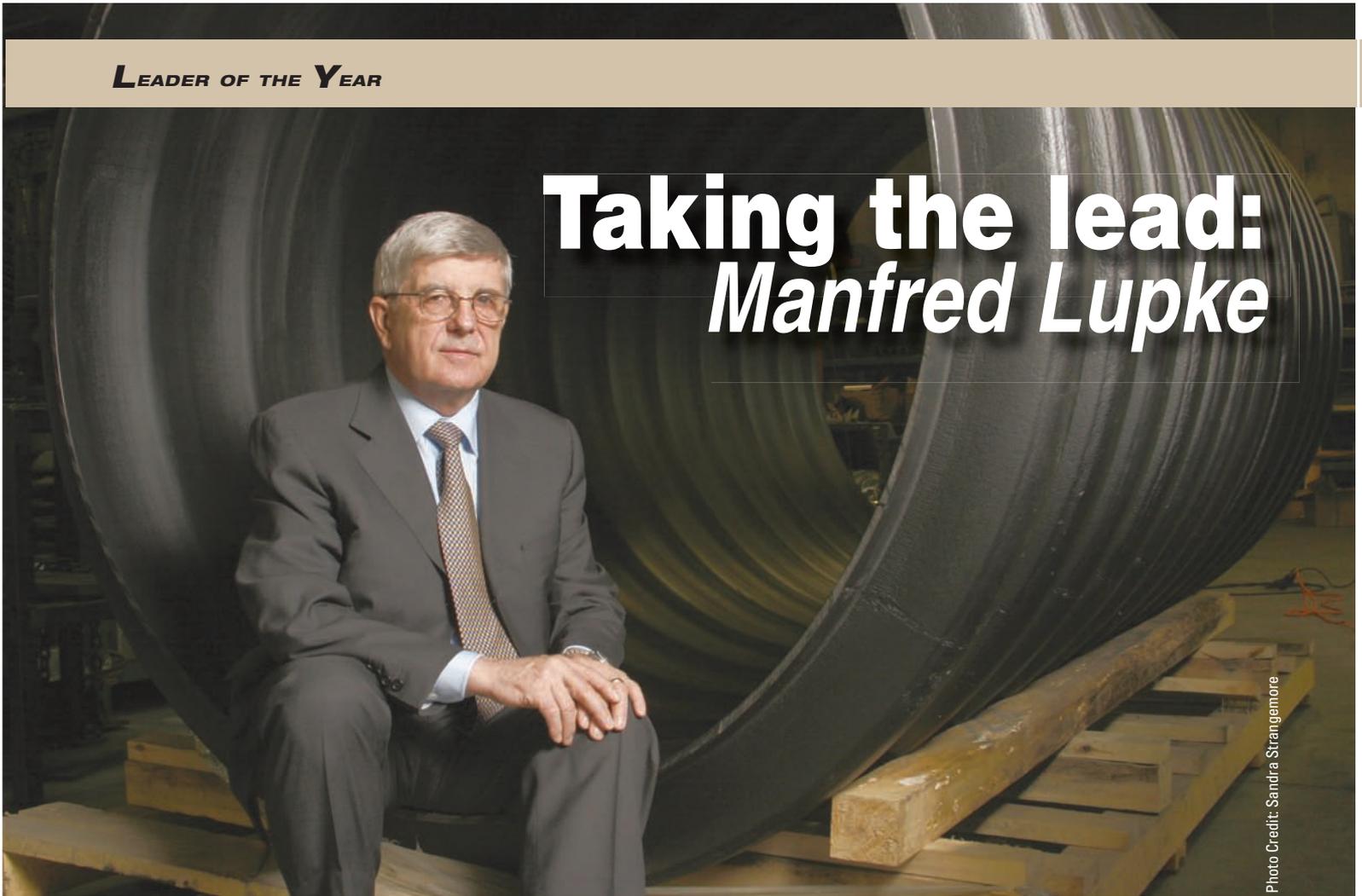


Photo Credit: Sandra Strangemore

Like many new Canadians, Manfred Lupke came to this country from Germany in 1969 with a good education, a handful of dreams, and a young family in tow. And like many immigrants, Lupke found that local employers did not recognize his qualifications as a mechanical engineer.

Lupke took a job as a maintenance worker to support his family, until he heard about a company that was looking for someone with the experience needed to build machines.

“At the interview, I was shown a four inch drainage pipe and asked if I could build a machine to make this product,” said Lupke. “I convinced them that I could, and got the job.”

Lupke built his first corrugator in 1970, and worked with the company until his employer lost interest in the business. In 1973, he teamed up with his wife and a colleague to establish a corrugated plastic manufacturing equipment company called Corma Inc.

Corma Inc.’s Manfred Lupke, this year’s recipient of the CPIA’s Leader of the Year Award, has built a global business from the ground up. The prominent businessman and inventor has helped put Canada on the map for the corrugated plastic pipe manufacturing equipment sector, and defended the intellectual property rights of equipment manufacturers in Asia and Europe. And even after more than 30 years of leadership, new innovations are already in the pipeline.

By Umair Abdul, editorial assistant

“Corma was started with very little office space, but good machine designs,” said Lupke. “At that time, many small companies folded within a few years. They had spacious offices to make them feel like big bosses, but they didn’t have the products.”

Fast forward almost 34 years, and Corma is one of the leading global

producers of equipment for corrugated plastic pipe manufacturing. The company has dominated the narrow but important market niche for manufacturing equipment, selling its products in more than 80 countries and earning a majority of its revenue outside of North America. Through it all, the family Lupke worked hard to support has

remained by his side, with both son Stefan and daughter Annette taking leading management positions in the company.

Corma is headquartered at a 100,000 square foot plant in Concord, Ont., with an additional 20,000 square foot facility in Forest, Ont. The company also recently opened a production plant in Shanghai, China, further solidifying its leadership position in the Asian markets. Corma has grown significantly from its founding staff of three employees, with a total staff of approximately 250 people.

The Canadian Plastic Industry Association (CPIA) has named Lupke the Leader of the Year for his accomplishments with Corma. Lupke has successfully weathered the ups and the downs of the Canadian manufacturing climate, becoming a world leader for corrugators.

"There is a lot of innovation there, both in the product and the way it has been marketed globally, so we are trying to celebrate that," explained CPIA president and CEO Serge Lavoie.

PULLING AHEAD OF THE PACK

In an era where more equipment producers are creating brands and identities in order to capture the global attention of the plastics manufacturing industry, Corma has maintained a relatively low profile. Lupke's focus has always been on investing more heavily in the research and development (R&D) aspect of his operation.

"We continue to innovate and develop our lines, [and] our technology is the most advanced," he noted. "We have built machines to produce the largest as well as the smallest corrugated plastic pipe in the world."

When Corma first emerged in the corrugators sector, Lupke designed his machinery without any knowledge of what the other players in the industry were doing. He has maintained this tradition of innovation and trailblazing excellence, finding new ways to enhance and improve Corma's core technologies.

"Without constant R&D, one cannot

stay in business," said Lupke. "I have seen too many companies in business with a good product but no continuous development eventually fail. If you don't continue to develop your ideas, you will get left behind."

Corma's current offerings include corrugators, pulsating corrugators, die equipment and auxiliary equipment,

and the company's machines have been used for a range of applications. The company is currently supplying a range of markets, such as the mechanical field; the electrical, medical and automotive industries; and storm and sewer pipes.

Lupke's efforts are completely focused on developing equipment, and

the company does not manufacture corrugated pipes of its own. Corma did produce pipe through two subsidiary companies, but Lupke decided to sell them almost 25 years ago. Although the focus on one niche may seem backwards in an age of consolidation and vertical integration, Lupke does not believe in competing with his clients.

“To be fair to our customers, we decided not to compete with them,” he explained. “It has been proven by our long list of customers that it was a very good decision to stop producing pipe and selling those companies.”

In the coming years, Corma will continue to expand its strong focus on R&D. Lupke noted that he is thinking about getting a new R&D facility close to the company’s headquarters in Concord, Ont. in order to meet the spatial needs of the operation.

GIVING BACK

The annual Leader of the Year honour traditionally celebrates more than the creation of a successful business. The CPIA also looks for leaders who have invested back in their communities and industries.

“The criteria is looking for a well-rounded person, somebody who gives back to the community,” said CPIA’s Lavoie. “Are they a good employer, are they giving to their communities?”

Lupke fits the bill on all of these counts, taking an active part in his local community and the Canadian plastics industry. In addition to providing a bursary for children and grandchildren of employees who are pursuing post secondary education, Lupke is a director of the York Central Hospital Foundation. On the plastics side, he is involved with several industry associations and organizations, and regularly exhibits at trade shows around the world.

Lupke has also been very involved with the Canada China Business Council, helping further secure major business ties for Canadian manufacturers in Far Eastern markets.

FIGHTING FOR INTEGRITY

Taking the lead on industry issues isn’t

always an easy task, and entrepreneurs who are ahead of the curve often open themselves up to criticism and ridicule. Lupke started to get patents for his company’s inventions in countries like China and Germany in the 1980s. Intellectual property rights were not a major industry issue at the time, but Corma went against the grain and secured the rights to its technologies.

“Years ago, our competition laughed at us,” said Lupke. “They aren’t laughing now.”

The patents have given Corma the option of legal action against competitors who modify and resell Corma’s innovations.

“The current climate is quite rough,” he said. “Almost all of our competitors in Europe, as in China, are infringing on Corma’s patents.”

Lupke uses honesty and integrity as the guiding principles for his company, and patent infringements don’t sit well with his business philosophy. His company has become a leader in defending its patent technologies in foreign markets, with several victories against competitors who have ripped off Corma’s designs and technologies.

In a global industry where intellectual property rights are increasingly devalued and deregulated, Corma now has the means and resources to defend its patents. Corma’s legal offensive against patent infringements may help make the global equipment manufacturing industry more equitable for other Canadian companies.

Lupke’s strong support for intellectual property rights perfectly embodies his straight on, unflinching approach towards business challenges. Even after witnessing almost 34 years of the ups and downs in the plastic pipe manufacturing equipment sector first-hand, he maintains a positive outlook about what’s yet to come.

“I really don’t see any changes which we have not addressed, be it the high Canadian dollar or the increased [prices of] aluminum or other materials,” said Lupke. “Corma will continue to meet any challenges head on.”

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