



*Carsten, Christa,
Ernst and Thomas
Pfaff: two generations,
one task*

A family for special cases

“For heavy, difficult transports” – that’s the slogan of the family transport company Pfaff. trailer world visited a quite normal family in Hamburg.

A job that’s too difficult? A problem that can’t be solved? Not for Ernst Pfaff. After all, difficult cases are his daily business. “If we can’t do it on our own, we do it together with partners”, says the 68-year old founder of the special transport company Pfaff in Hamburg.

Relocating a beverages factory to Ireland, conveyance of a paper production line to India or, as now, moving a chip company from Bielefeld to Kulim in Malaysia: two to three times a year, the SME company deals with this kind of special global assignment. Smaller company relocation jobs in Germany are handled on a monthly basis. Otherwise, the company transports almost anything that is too complicated for anyone else: whether it’s an oversized power generator or a dismantled lathe for railway wheels, spread out over five trucks. Transporting forklift trucks, printing presses, machine tools and X-ray machines is the company’s staple business.

Together we’re strong Nearly every job is different. “It’s not only the equipment and fleet that count”, says Pfaff, who speaks as “we” rather than “I”. It’s just as important to have decades of experience and a reliable workforce. The closest confidantes come

from the direct family. Wife Christa has always been responsible for accounting and controlling. Sons Carsten (47) and Thomas (39) have also long since joined the family business. “The firm is part of our home, it’s where we earned our first pocket money”, says Carsten Pfaff. Three years ago, the brothers started to take over for responsibility for running the day-to-day business, while the whole family has shouldered overall management of the firm for the last twelve months.

Innovative technology Meanwhile the senior boss concentrates mainly on corporate strategy and investment. Even so, nothing goes unnoticed. “All the post and every order still goes over my desk”, reports the agile businessman. The desk in his office has two screens monitoring what’s happening on the company premises covering 25,000 m². The shelf behind him displays numerous car racing cups. “Meanwhile I’ve turned to golf, it’s more relaxing”, he says, while turning his attention to what’s happening outside the window.

One of the red-and-yellow low-level trucks bearing the Pfaff logo comes into the yard. The flatbed is lowered hydraulically to unload a forklift truck. “This makes us flexible when loading →



»I'm just not the kind to drop out of the business and put my feet up«



Carsten and Thomas Pfaff.



They used to earn their pocket money here. Now they're Managing Directors.

and unloading from different heights”, says Pfaff, either directly on the ground or from any kind of loading ramp up to 1.50 m. Next to it there’s a diagonal loader with a larger loading volume which is used to transport heavy machines up to eight tons. Altogether the fleet has 50 special vehicles. Mega low-loaders, diagonal hoisting cradles or mega electric cranes: “No vehicle in the fleet is like any other”, says Carsten Pfaff.

New developments The requirements differ just as much as the orders. The low-loaders and hoisting gear can be adapted in the company’s own garage to keep pace with what’s needed every time. The company also pursues its own development work here, such as a trailer with a loading height of 4.20 m under a tarpaulin, specially designed for the high masts of forklift trucks. Or the mega diagonal hoisting cradle loader with continuous flat-bed. At the moment, work is in progress with a corresponding manufacturer on an innovation for low-loaders. “To be even more flexible, last year we completely renovated the garage and fitted it out with state-of-the-art engineering”, says Pfaff, who has meanwhile put on a neon-yellow safety waistcoat over his grey suit and crosses the garage building with a springy step. Here the company modifies and repairs trucks belonging to other companies as well as its own. The



truck washing installation facing it is also in good use. “The current slack period gives customers time for this kind of thing”, says Pfaff.

Complex processes Special transports are also affected by the crisis. “We naturally also notice it when our customers’ turnover declines”, says Pfaff. To counteract these effects, the company has diversified into new areas, such as transporting milking machines and milking robots. The long-distance sector is also expanding, as well as business with company relocations. “What’s more, we are increasingly moving away from being a transport company to a service provider”, says Thomas Pfaff. This includes not only loading and unloading the freight but also the complete dismantling and installation of machinery, including making all the connections and related storage activities. The orders often entail highly complex processes.

It took a whole week for example just to plan the processes involved in relocating the chip factory to Malaysia. “Where major projects are concerned, we inspect the unloading site personally in advance”, says Carsten Pfaff who is responsible for the project. Drive, entrance door, condition of the ground outside and the floor inside, parking area – everything is examined to ensure that any hindrances can be ruled out in advance. If a door is too low, structural alterations may be necessary or the machine will have to be dismantled outside. Fitters and electricians accompany the transport to cover such cases.

Photos: Bergunde, Pfaff



One of Pfaffs special jobs: relocating the chip factory from Bielefeld to Kulim/Malaysia

For the move to Kulim/Malaysia, the whole production facility from the die cutter via the screen printing machine to the press was dismantled and loaded part for part in 40' containers. Together with the actual transporting equipment, altogether 15 containers then set off from Bielefeld to Kulim. The load was accompanied by a mechanic, an electrical engineer and three transport crew who spent three weeks in Asia, unpacking and installing the factory on site.

Constant growth The projects were much simpler to start with. 49 years ago, Ernst Pfaff set up business with a VW Transporter, which he drove himself in the early days. The 21-year old precision mechanic and his wife Christa initially intended to start trading with potatoes. But they weren't granted a permit. Giving up was simply not an issue. "As we'd already purchased the Transporter, we decided to use it to transport other goods", says Pfaff. Two years later, he purchased a low loader from a firm that had gone bankrupt. In those days, this was a really innovative vehicle that propelled the small firm into a niche in the market. The first contracts to transport forklift trucks soon followed. "For a long time, we had a kind of monopoly", says Pfaff. The range of transport services was then extended to include printing presses and machine tools. A good 15 years later the company had a fleet of 16 vehicles and a workforce of 20 employees. In the early 80s, the company opened a branch in Bremen and the company enjoyed constant growth. Today the 100 employees generate annual sales of around 12 million Euro.

At Pfaff they won't bow to the price pressure which currently dictates the industry. "We counter this trend with quality", says Pfaff. The vehicles are constantly maintained in the company's

own garage. The firm regularly invests in its fleet which is always state of the art. "And behind every trailer you'll find an axle from BPW", says Pfaff. "After all, they have a lot to contend with." Nor do they cut corners when it comes to staff. The vehicles are always only driven by the company's own drivers. Many of them have been with Pfaff since receiving their initial vocational training here. It takes a full year to complete the advanced training needed to transport the sensitive machine tools and printing machines. Sub-contractors are only used if they are known on a personal basis. "This approach has always worked well", says Thomas Pfaff. The family firm has a reputation for punctual deliveries without any damage.



Pfaff special fleet: from very high to very low or very wide

Reliable values The reputation also extends to flexibility and speed. "Customers who ring up will get a special vehicle in 45 minutes", says Carsten Pfaff. Speedy decisions are also often necessary when handling orders.

"Communication is often easier within the family setting, with greater scope for decision making", he says.

In spite of growth and progress, the corporate values have remained the same over the years. "We attach importance to fairness with business partners and customers alike", says Pfaff. This is why an order is only said to have been successful if everything went well. "Of course we want to earn money. But profit is not all that counts". With this philosophy, some customer relations have existed for 45 years. (bb)

→ Info More information about Ernst Pfaff can be found online at www.pfaff-hh.de