



## Closing Thoughts on K 2022

# “Motivated to the Hilt”

At the end of the K trade fair, **Kunststoffe** put a few questions to some well-known “industry heads”: What are your closing thoughts? What were the highlights? And how is the industry starting the new year? Almost across the board, the mood was perceived as very positive – despite the various ongoing crises. Companies are revealing themselves to be crisis-tested, cautiously optimistic to upbeat, and they came to Düsseldorf, Germany, bearing numerous examples of how recycling works in practice.

One key trend that was perceptible during the eight days of the trade fair in Düsseldorf was a willingness to cooperate: whether in terms of the circular economy, where various initiatives, such as R-Cycle and HolyGrail, are proof of how important the interaction between each link in the value chain is, or in the field of machine communications, where visitors at the booths were able to use their smart-phones to call up live OPC UA data from over 40 manufacturers.



Ingemar Bühler, PlasticsEurope: “I sense a strong commitment to the circular economy. These are people on a mission.” © Hanser/Schröder

**Kunststoffe:** *What are your closing thoughts on K?*

**Manfred Hackl:** K 2022 once again had everything you would expect of a K fair: there were technical innovations on display, the mood was good and we are delighted that so many visitors returned.

**Dr. Stefan Engleder:** My thoughts are very positive. The mood was much better than expected. Given the number of crises currently in play, we were worried that this wouldn't be the case. We

were pleased with the many high-caliber visitors and the level of discussions we had with customers at our stand.

**Ingemar Bühler:** The mood was good, despite the overall economic situation. There is a lot of uncertainty, but everyone realizes that the only way to get through these crises is to pull together and cooperate. Accordingly, many companies and organizations in the value chain are forging closer links, seeking to work very intensively with one another. That pleases me greatly.

**Michael Wittmann:** I am very satisfied all round. The show exceeded our expectations across the board, whether in terms of visitor traffic or of closing deals. It helps when people get together and share ideas – “talking shop” needs to be done face-to-face. We've missed that over the past three years.

**Gerhard Böhm:** We had a great trade fair, with plenty of international participation and visitors crowding our booth. Our Arburg Green World Pavilion also worked well. We were really looking forward to this event – and it met all our expectations.

**Kunststoffe:** *Wasn't it noticeable that certain countries were absent from the throngs of visitors?*

**Böhm:** Oh, yes. There were very few Chinese visitors here. That being said, there were surprisingly a lot more from India, and Turkey was also well represented. Added to which, we had large groups of travelers from North and South America, along with visitors from Taiwan, Australia and many other distant countries. For that reason, the quality of the world's leading trade fair didn't suffer. My colleagues were happy when each trade show day was over – and that's always the best sign!

**Kunststoffe:** *What's your own take on K 2022?*

**Michael Baumeister:** It was a well-attended trade show for the entirety of its run. With the exception of our Chinese customers, almost all our customers from every country called to our booth. Many of the discussions there centered around solutions targeting a functioning circular economy, such as BOPE.

**Ulrich Reifenhäuser:** We had high expectations – happily, even they were exceeded. Business was very good but even better was the fact that the complex challenges were addressed in concrete terms. We are no longer just talking about machines, talking about doing things faster and cheaper, or talking about new products. The approach is now more holistic. The circular economy is dominating everything. That sets K 2022 apart from its predecessors. Our customers want and need to have circular economy solutions that work. They are under pressure from their governments and the market. It's a question of



Dr. Stefan Engleder, Engel: “Three years ago, recycling was a distant vision – today we show solutions at work in practice.”

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Manfred Hackl, Erema: "Today, we deal with challenges in a more relaxed way, because we had to learn to do so in recent years. We are crisis-tested." © Hanser/Schröder

the best overall concept. In this connection, for example, our EVO Fusion extrusion process, which was specifically designed for recycled material, generated enormous interest, because we were able to show that even low-grade recycled materials can be processed into high-performance films.

**Thorsten Kühmann:** K 2022 was sensational, because it had such an international presence. Because the visitors who came knew what they wanted. And I think we succeeded extremely well in platforming important topics, such as the circular economy, digitalization and energy efficiency. This was a coming together of many great aspects at once.

**Kunststoffe:** Mr. Franken, how was K for you, the project manager?

**Thomas Franken:** I've a very positive take on it. The sheer joy exuded by the entire plastics and rubber industry here during the last seven days was both palpable and contagious. We witnessed the importance of personal interaction when it comes to addressing all the topics that will concern the industry in the future. Even if visitor numbers were down on pre-pandemic levels, we came in at 80 % of the 2019 pre-show numbers – that's more than even we had expected.

**Kunststoffe:** Which regions did the visitors come from?

**Franken:** We welcomed few visitors from Asia, but travel restrictions are still in force there. Regional holidays also meant there were slightly fewer visitors from India. But overall, there was little change

across countries. And the rate of international participation is on a par with previous events: over 70 % of visitors were from abroad.

**Kunststoffe:** What was your personal show highlight?

**Wittmann:** For me, it has to be the huge number of visitors. We thought that significantly fewer would come than in 2019. We presented our innovations at two booths, showcasing interesting developments across all product areas – from automation to peripheral equipment to injection molding machines.

**Engleder:** The highlight for me was the processing of rPET by thin-wall injection molding at our Engel booth. Production in a single processing step is a world first never been seen before in that form in injection molding. And when you see it in action, it's fantastic.

**Kunststoffe:** At this year's K, practical recycling seems to have been embraced much more ...

**Engleder:** That's exactly right. Three years ago, recycling was a distant vision. The green shoots were evident then. And everybody started taking it on board. From then, we went on to develop industrial-scale solutions that we can show working in practice. We are primarily targeting two areas: recycling for the packaging industry, especially in the food sector, and recycling of engineering plastics.



Peter von Hoffmann, Coperion: "Inquiries about recycling exceeded inquiries about engineering plastics for the first time, which is a turning point for Coperion."

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Michael Wittmann, Wittmann Group: "We are fundamentally optimistic as we start into the new year. Despite major challenges, we are targeting the same level of sales as in 2022."

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**Kunststoffe:** Let's pass the question on – what was your personal K highlight?

**Bühler:** The real examples of "circular" products. We talk a lot about key technologies and innovations. But people need to be able to see and touch things. On display a few meters away from our booth was the first running shoe made entirely from CCU. You'll soon be able to buy it and run in it – that makes the concept very tangible. Much bigger and more important examples, of course, are to be found in electric mobility and the housing sector.

**Baumeister:** Mono-material structures continue to be a top issue. It's a very important area for us, too, and proved to be hugely popular.

**Böhm:** Our Green World Pavilion in the Circular Economy Forum. We took an unusual approach that deliberately didn't set out to be the ultimate technology presentation. We deliberately portrayed the overarching contexts and the scope available to every company when it comes to sustainability. The booth was completely staffed and operated by trainees and students. Watching these young people rock the booth, have fun, and actively communicate was very gratifying to me – and also tells me that this industry has an exciting future.

**Peter von Hoffmann:** For me, it was definitely the crowds thronging the recycling area. We also had our own pavilion and exhibits here. We noticed that, for the first time, inquiries about recycling outnumbered inquiries





Thorsten Kühmann, VDMA: "We expect sales to move sideways next year – but at an extremely high level." © Hanser/Schröder

about engineering plastics, and for Coperion that is a turning point. But it also shows where the market is headed.

**Kunststoffe:** Does this turning point impact your product range?

**von Hoffmann:** Yes, recycled raw materials, for example, are different in terms of handling in that they're much more difficult to meter. Fortunately, we have a lot of experts in this area across our different metering, material handling, and extrusion divisions. Recycling lines require the interplay of all these solutions.

**Kunststoffe:** Mr. Kühmann, what's your personal show highlight?

**Kühmann:** The fact that the show could be held again in exactly the same way it was three years ago. We were able to pick



Gerhard Böhm, Arburg: "The young people who rocked our Arburg Green World Pavilion are proof to me that our industry has an exciting future!" © Hanser/Schröder

up where we left off as if nothing had happened. After two years of unremitting troubles and always being tripped up one way or the other, it's amazing that everything worked out so well.

**Kunststoffe:** We're not exactly starting the new year off without any trip-ups or troubles ... How prepared are the members of the VDMA?

**Kühmann:** The mood here in Düsseldorf is fantastic, and that will give us a lift for the weeks and months ahead. Our members are largely optimistic about the new year. And that is down to international demand. In Europe, high energy prices have dampened the mood somewhat. In addition, many member companies still have large order backlogs. They are more inclined to work through their backlogs and convert them into sales. We expect sales to move sideways next year – but at an extremely high level.

**Kunststoffe:** What's your forecast for the new year?

**Hackl:** For us, business is developing very positively – and so my forecast for the new year is also positive. I'm convinced that, in order to secure Europe as a location, the EU will have to work out a solution to the power and energy situation in the coming weeks. The plastics industry in America and Asia is flourishing at the moment.

**Kunststoffe:** So, the mood is good, despite the crises?

**Hackl:** Naturally, the situation is tense. But we have learned to deal with problems in recent years. Three years ago, people would have said: staff shortages, delivery problems, inflation ... I don't believe it. Now we're better at coping, because we had to muddle through in recent years. We are crisis-tested and have learned a lot during this time.

**Kunststoffe:** What's your forecast for the new year?

**Engleder:** That is a very difficult question. The recession is affecting almost all of the world's economic regions. But we still want to take the positive away with us. Our team is totally motivated – and a bit tired too after this long trade show ... But we are motivated to the hilt and that's exactly how we will start the new year!

**Bühler:** This will be an exciting year. I do

have some concerns surrounding gas availability and pricing. Conversely, I'm also looking forward to 2023. We have a lot of exciting projects and lines under construction at our member companies that are due to come on stream next year. And seeing large-scale mechanical and chemical recycling plants and new pilot projects for genuine key technologies taking root not only among our European neighbors but also in Germany is something I really look forward to.

**Kunststoffe:** Despite delivery difficulties, are these projects still on track?

**Bühler:** We'll know by year-end whether everything is on track. The reason I am optimistic and also proud is that we got together with companies and approached the federal government with whom we had intensive discussions about gas and electricity prices over the course of four to six weeks. The feedback from business leaders within our industry showed that the road will be much rockier than we originally thought. But the unanimous message is that we mustn't slow down on the path to the circular economy. There is a very strong commitment here, these are people on a mission. We want to achieve this and, if things get rockier, then we will have to try harder and work together even more intensively.

**Kunststoffe:** Mr. Wittmann, what's your forecast for the new year?



Ulrich Reifenhäuser, Reifenhäuser Group: "It's no longer a question of being cheaper or faster – the approach now being taken is holistic. The focus is on developing solutions for the circular economy that work."

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**Michael Baumeister, Brückner Maschinenbau:** "Investments continue to be made, for example in packaging and electromobility. We are looking positively ahead to the new year."

© Hanser/Schröder

**Wittmann:** We still have a huge order backlog that we will start working on in the new year. Our capacity for injection molding machines, for example, will be fully utilized until well into the middle of next year – even though demand is now starting to weaken.

**Kunststoffe:** Does that mean you are currently in a position to deliver?

**Wittmann:** Yes. Perhaps a weaker market will bring about even better deliverability, because in that event fewer parts will be called off by other sectors or industries. That could work in our favor. Given our current order backlog, we won't feel any kind of slowdown until the third quarter. The show demonstrated that, despite everything, demand is there. We managed to land and close a number of very nice projects. In other words, the mood is not quite at rock bottom. Of course, the issue of energy supplies will continue to depress the mood in the coming weeks and months ... We'll have to see how that plays out for the converters. We are fundamentally optimistic as we head into the new year: we believe that 2023 will be a major challenge, but we are hopeful that it will be at the same level as 2022. We are targeting the same level of sales.

**Kunststoffe:** Your forecast for 2023?

**Böhm:** It will prove challenging. The mood at the show was very good, even though the framework parameters paint a different picture. It is to be hoped that

the many positive approaches will impact on investments with as few hitches as possible. When things will take off is anybody's guess, unfortunately.

**Baumeister:** Despite all the difficulties, what I experienced was a very positive mood. Investments continue to be made, for example, in packaging and electromobility. As a result, and despite all the operational problems, we're heading into the new year very positively.

**von Hoffmann:** We are erring on the side of cautious optimism. There are some dark clouds on the horizon in the guise of inflation, energy prices and war. Nevertheless, most of our European customers are still producing at full capacity and several of them are in the process of developing new, innovative products. Several segments and regions are even blossoming. So business will certainly not be bad in 2023 either.

**Reifenhäuser:** I'm very positive about the new year, because we are in the fortunate position of being able to look relatively far ahead. Over the course of K 2022 there were many concrete projects initiated. What's more, our business is very international in its outlook, and that is helping us in the current energy crisis, which mainly affects Germany. However, I believe that too will change again, because it has to! As we are a machine maker, energy costs are not as burdensome for us as they are for converters, but an industrialized country like Germany cannot afford permanently excessive energy prices. ■

Interviews: Susanne Schröder



**Thomas Franken, Messe Düsseldorf:** "We are delighted to have had more than 176,000 visitors – 70 % of them from abroad. That is an outstanding result!" © Hanser/Schröder

## Info

### Interviewees

**Michael Baumeister** is Managing Director Technology at Brückner Maschinenbau.

**Gerhard Böhm** is Managing Director with responsibility for Sales and Service at Arburg.

**Ingemar Bühler** is Chief Executive Officer at PlasticsEurope.

**Dr. Stefan Engleder** is Managing Director of Engel.

**Thomas Franken** is Project Manager for K at Messe Düsseldorf.

**Manfred Hackl** is Managing Director of Erema Group.

**Peter von Hoffmann** is Business Unit Head at Coperion.

**Thorsten Kühmann** is Managing Director of VDMA Fachverband Kunststoff- und Gummimaschinen (Association for Plastics and Rubber Machinery).

**Ulrich Reifenhäuser** is CSO of the Reifenhäuser Group.

**Michael Wittmann** is Managing Director of Wittmann Group.

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