



# Devden celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary

This May, Devden celebrates its 30th year in business. Since its small beginnings in the early 1980s, Devden has shared in the peaks and dips of South Africa's pulp and paper industry. We chat with founder, Devlyn Fraser, about how these experiences have developed Devden into the established supplier to our mills that it is today.

## Humble beginnings

Armed with R700 in working capital and the enthusiasm of a 26 year old, Fraser established Devden in an outbuilding of his home in Pinetown. "When we started, there were no faxes – never mind emails," Fraser recalls. "We bought our first fax machine in 1986 and it cost the same as a car we bought at the same time. It was almost the same size too, but much, much slower – G2 speed. However, we were very impressed at the time: sending A4 drawings took 3-4 minutes per page, instead of 3-4 days by courier."

While his wife attended to the company's administration, Fraser was on the road for 6 days a week providing mills with a full scope of service. "I did everything back then," Fraser explains. "I visited mills, spoke to management, spoke to the guys on the floors and serviced the machines myself."

Devden began by supplying Gusum Viror forming fabrics and Scandiafelt press felts and dryer screens. The company's first order was from Premier Paper Mill in Kliprivier, where Nampak Tissue is now based. "We serviced pretty much every machine in the country," explains Fraser, "including start-up clothing at both the new Sappi Mill at Ngodwana and the new Mondi Mill at Richards Bay (circa 1983/4)." At this time, Devden also launched the first locally based Scanpro felt analysis service.

## Challenges and changes

In an attempt to influence the United Nations to recommend binding sanctions against Apartheid South Africa, Sweden ordered an end to all trade with South Africa in 1987. The 1987 Swedish sanctions proved to be the biggest challenge to Devden in its 30-year history, forcing the company to end its Scandiafelt agency and other Swedish business. "We were really gutted [and] had some very fast footwork to do, to replace what was the bulk of our business," explains Fraser. Devden found solace with companies such as C.H. Johnson Ltd,

Interfelt Spa (Heimbach Iberica), James Ross Ltd., P. Villforth & Co. AG and Verseidag GmbH. "We were very pleased to quickly secure quality Principals in the UK and elsewhere in Europe to replace the Swedish ones," says Fraser. "We were very fortunate indeed that serendipity was on our side."

From Devden's continued success with its new Principals, the company grew from a 'one-man band' in 1982 to over 40 people in the early 1990s, including subsidiary companies. "Technology and changing strategy has meant that we have also 'downsized' over the years," explains Fraser, "and now we operate very well with only 13 people." Over the years, Devden has borne witness to

Devlyn Fraser began Devden as a 'one-man band' in 1982, at which stage he was the 'Chief Cook and Bottleswasher', in his words. "The cartoon says it all. I was thicker on top and thinner in the middle then," Fraser jokes.



a similar 'downsizing' in South Africa's pulp and paper manufacturers. "When we started out in the early '80s, there was expansion at Sappi Saiccor and new mills at Sappi Ngodwana and Mondi Richards Bay," says Fraser. "Now we see the reverse, with down-sizing, machine and mill closures in South Africa and in our neighbours. The industry is shrinking, save the big expansions at Sappi Chemical Cellulose. This is also a function of competition. With massive increases in energy costs and difficult labour issues, it makes it hard for our mills to compete in the 'shrinking world'. Other mills in other countries are experiencing the same. In many instances the playing fields simply are not level. The rise and rise of China epitomises this."

However, Fraser believes that the biggest change in South Africa's pulp and paper industry since he founded Devden has been its apparent "loss of soul". "It has become impersonal, lost its soul somehow. It seems that personal relationships are less important, less valued, less appreciated – confirmed appointments are often not kept, everyone is under pressure of workload and time. People also change positions and even jobs, so that relationship-building is difficult, even impossible sometimes." While Fraser recognises that this is not unique to our local industry, he recollects that "we used to have more fun – and still get the business done!" Having said that, we have also made some very good, long-standing, friendships over the years. Sadly some have passed on and some have retired, but there are still very good people in the industry and it's our pleasure and privilege to serve them.

What has remained the same throughout Devden's history is the company's continual battle with the mergers and acquisitions of its principals. "Being an agent/rep is tricky," explains Fraser. "If you're useless, you quickly get fired. If you're satisfactory, then things trundle along indefinitely. However, if you're very successful then the

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## Devden through the decades

- 1982 March Devden started operations  
May 13th Devden (Pty) Ltd registered No.  
First representations:  
Scandiafelt AB: press felts, screens & filtration media  
Gusum Viror AB: forming fabrics
- 1983 JUD AG\*: guides and stretchers
- 1984 Celpap AB : Pulp & Paper Consulting Engineers
- 1985 **Explo-Control\***: explosion control systems
- 1986/7 Introduction of Swedish Trade Sanctions.
- 1987 C.H. Johnson Ltd: forming fabrics and dewatering equipment  
Interfelt Spa; (Heimbach Iberica): press felts & dryer screens
- 1988 James Ross Ltd\*: showers, doctors & oscillators  
P. Villforth & Co AG\*: Industrial filtration media
- 1990 Verseidag GmbH: Industrial filtration media
- 1993 Avesta AB: stainless steel, components, welding products  
Alfa Laval Celleco: centri-cleaners and save-all filters
- 1994 Lorentzen & Wettre AB\*: quality and process control instrumentation
- 1995 Durametal Inc.(Andritz): refiner plates & fillings
- 1997 Salsnes Filter A/S\*: suspended solids removal & dewatering
- 1999 Salsnes Filter A/S\*: license to manufacture in RSA  
OpTest Inc: optical paper testing equipment  
Solaronics Process Sa: Infra-red drying systems  
Corbellini Spa.: dewatering elements and ceramics  
Scandiafelt AB: industrial fabrics for pulp & paper  
Cellwood Machinery AB\*: pulpers, screw-presses & dispersing systems  
Perplas Ltd: plastic foils and centri-cleaner components
- 2003 IBS-PPG GmbH\*: ceramics, dewatering elements, JUD, James Ross
- 2004 Metrans AB\*: handling equipment for pulp & paper  
Sicutec (formerly Ekman)\*: used/refurbished p&p equipment  
Fibro Systems AB: optical paper testing equipment  
UMV AB: paper machine re-builders
- 2007 Ichikawa Inc\*: shoe-press belts
- 2010 GapCon GmbH\*: shoe-presses and roll services  
Bellmer GmbH\*: paper machines, re-builds, machinery, equipment, technology

\* Current principals

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**Congratulations  
Devden on 30 years of  
successful business  
within the pulp and  
paper industry.**



The team behind Devden (from left to right): Devlyn Fraser, David Row, Herman de Bruyn, Charlotte Row

unscrupulous Principals simply snatch the baton from you and set up on their own [local branches]. Because we have been so successful over the years, we have suffered this fate several times. Each time it's very disappointing and painful, and hurts us financially and personally. Sometimes it backfires and then everyone loses out, even the customers. I foresee more of this coming, as the cake gets smaller and some players get greedier."

**The best of the best**

Looking back, Devden has been involved in many exciting projects in its operations in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Swaziland and has found success with all of its principals in all mills. One project that stands out for Fraser in particular is his company's installation of the first automated paper testing line in South Africa at Sappi Enstra in 1996, which is still in daily use. "Since then, we have had 100% market share in all automated testing systems in South Africa," says Fraser, "from AutoLine 200s, through Autoline 300s, to the latest AutoLine 400, which fittingly will be delivered also to Sappi Enstra, in June this year."

Another important project for Devden has been the development and on-going success of its XLPcones range - Proudly South African, developed and made here, but now distributed world-wide by IBS Group. "Building Salsnes Filters locally under license was also an exciting challenge," Fraser adds, but "Mostly we look forward to and are excited about the 'next one', whatever it will be."

**The next 30 years in the pulp and paper industry**

When asked how he believes the pulp and paper industry will develop in the next 30 years, Fraser pinpoints the decline in the need for some paper products against a rapidly increasing digital consumer market. "However, the population of the world is expanding and people need increasing amounts of packaging and tissue products," he says. "Just look at the Kg consumption of paper per head in much of the world, it's really low. As this sector grows, the consumption will rise enormously. So will the need

for school stationery, especially in developing countries. As for me, I love to read - newspapers and books, every day. As long as they are still available on paper that will be my first choice [and] I think there are many like me."

Devden has already adapted accordingly. As the world's focus shifts from fossil fuels to the conservation and recycling of water, Devden is already backed by 15 years' experience with water treatment applications. "Since 1997, we have been involved with a wonderful Norwegian company, Salsnes Filter A/S," Fraser explains. Devden initially represented them but since 1999 is also licensed to produce Salsnes Filters in South Africa. Over the years, Devden has delivered several Salsnes Filters to paper mills in South Africa for various applications, and has also found success with the filters in fish processing and other industrial applications. "The Salsnes Filter was originally designed for municipal wastewater treatment plants (WWTP)," says Fraser, "but until very recently we have not managed to break into this very 'closed shop' industry. We are therefore delighted to have recently delivered two SF 6000 filters for a new WWTP in the Western Cape. We look forward to the start-up of that plant as it will provide a vital local reference, which I'm sure will start a new trend in primary screening in WWTPs in SA." Salsnes Filters are a fraction of the size and price of traditional clarifiers or primary settling

Devlyn Fraser holds an example of its XLPcones range, which is now distributed worldwide by IBS Group



tanks, and yet are for more effective. Fraser is therefore confident that this will be an important future market for Devden.

Devden is certainly still doing very well and, as Fraser puts it, "even though the cake is getting smaller, we are managing to get a little bigger slice of it". Devden's success is due to the quality and service from its Principals and from the company's own modus operandi of "always pay attention to detail, under-promise and over-deliver". "That way, we avoid disappointing anyone and simultaneously bolster our reputation of reliability," says Fraser, in line with Devden's motto of 'Quality... on Time!'

Making a particular contribution to Devden's success has been Fraser's partner, David Row. "I don't wish to single anyone out, but it would be remiss of me not to say how much I appreciate and value my friend and partner, David Row - he's been rock-solid since he joined us in 1986." Long before BBBEE, Row was made a company director in 1989 and became a shareholder in 1990. Six years later, Row's daughter Charlotte joined Devden and has become an irreplaceable administrative manager, while Herman de Bruyn leads the technical sales and service. "Although there's quite a lot of wind still left in both of us, David and I won't be around forever," says Fraser. "The younger generation in the company will, I hope, carry on when we leave off. With the support of the current staff in Devden and new people who will join

in future, I'm sure they will carry the torch well into the future."

"In the big picture, 30 years is a blink of an eye," Fraser says. But in the context of South African business, it is still a landmark to be recognised and celebrated. "I read once that 80% of all new businesses fail in the first two years. Of those that survive only 20% make ten years, reducing exponentially. So, here we are THIRTY YEARS down the road and surviving, or should I say thriving?"

For this, we congratulate Devden and wish them many successful years to come. ■



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**ichikawa**

**congratulates Devden on 30 years of successful business.**