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The Unikeller Division

As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Rieter sought to improve the capacity utilization and profitability of its spinning and associated machinery manufacturing operations by entering other sectors; this has been described in more detail in Volume I of this history.

More than a century later it seems that a similar transformation is taking place. The number of competing spinning machinery manufacturers has grown continually and pressure on prices is severe. In intellectual property disputes many rivals do not hesitate to take legal action. Instead of seeking a useful balance of competing interests, hot-shot lawyers in the USA, for example, have influenced market shares through court rulings. The call for diversification into sectors with different cyclical patterns therefore became ever louder. After systematic studies, Rieter decided in 1984 to seek a better balance in its markets by purchasing the Unikeller Group. At that time Unikeller mainly manufactured noise control and thermal insulation products. Successful sidelines were pursued in paints, varnishes and plasters, and in sheet metal working.

Rieter had exchanged ideas with noise control specialists at Unikeller since 1962 through contacts between their research units. These findings were useful to Rieter, for example, in the construction of its acoustic laboratory in Niedertöss.

At the time of the acquisition in 1984, Unikeller had sales of some 300 million Swiss francs, about 2200 personnel, and owned a group of com-

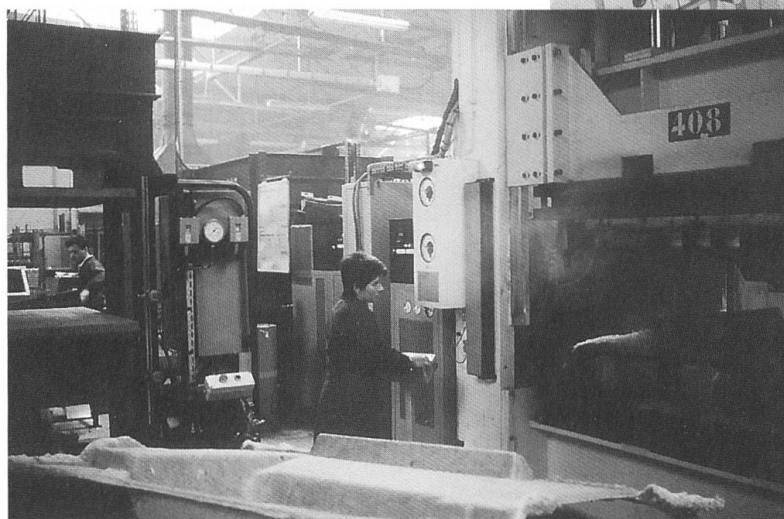
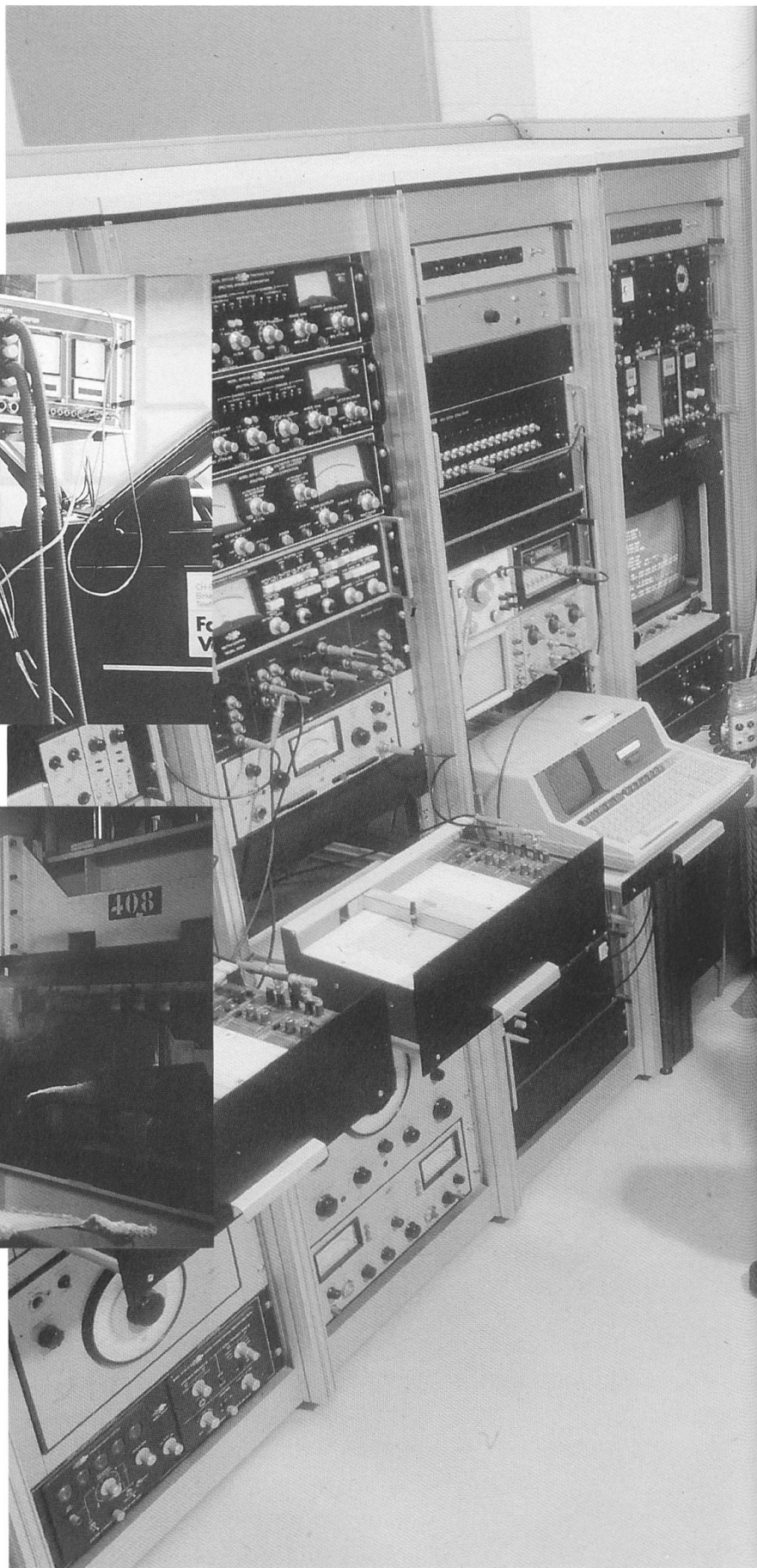
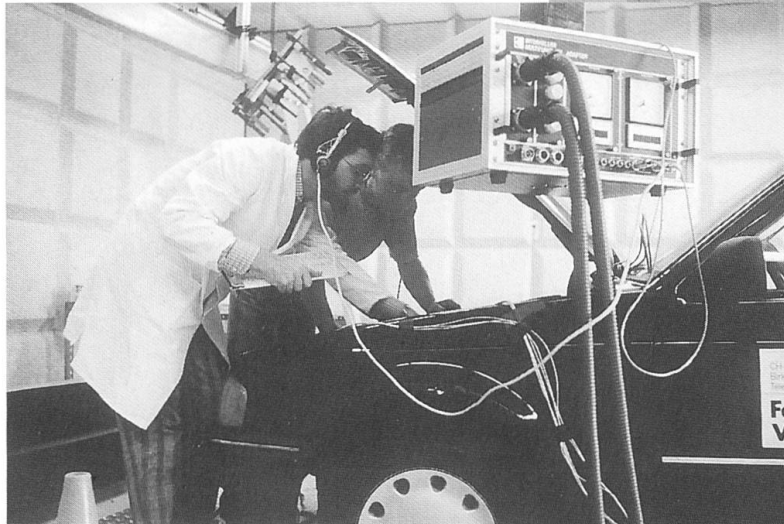
panies in Germany, France, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. It had joint ventures in Spain and licensing relationships with companies in Argentina, Brazil, Japan, South Africa, the USA and Canada. Individual products and integrated systems were produced in the field of noise control and thermal insulation. These were used in passenger cars, trucks, coaches and tractors. Their technical potential opened up the possibility of applications in railways and buildings.

The products

While noise and engine heat were part and parcel of the motor car's early years, the development of this sector soon brought demands for ways to protect people against both noise and heat. Noise control improves the quality of life and security of human beings and animals. Thermal insulation improves the energy balance and the service life of heat-sensitive structural components. Both products enable urgent needs to be satisfied which arise in connection with passenger cars, trucks, coaches, mobile and stationary machines, railways, buildings, etc. Insulation materials have to be used if these products cannot be designed to be low-noise or noise-free.

These elements can follow two main approaches: fabrics made from textile fibres and/or reprocessed textiles using secondary raw materials from recycling. The mats produced are bonded in different ways. As a result of systematic research, Unikeller knows the insulation values of the

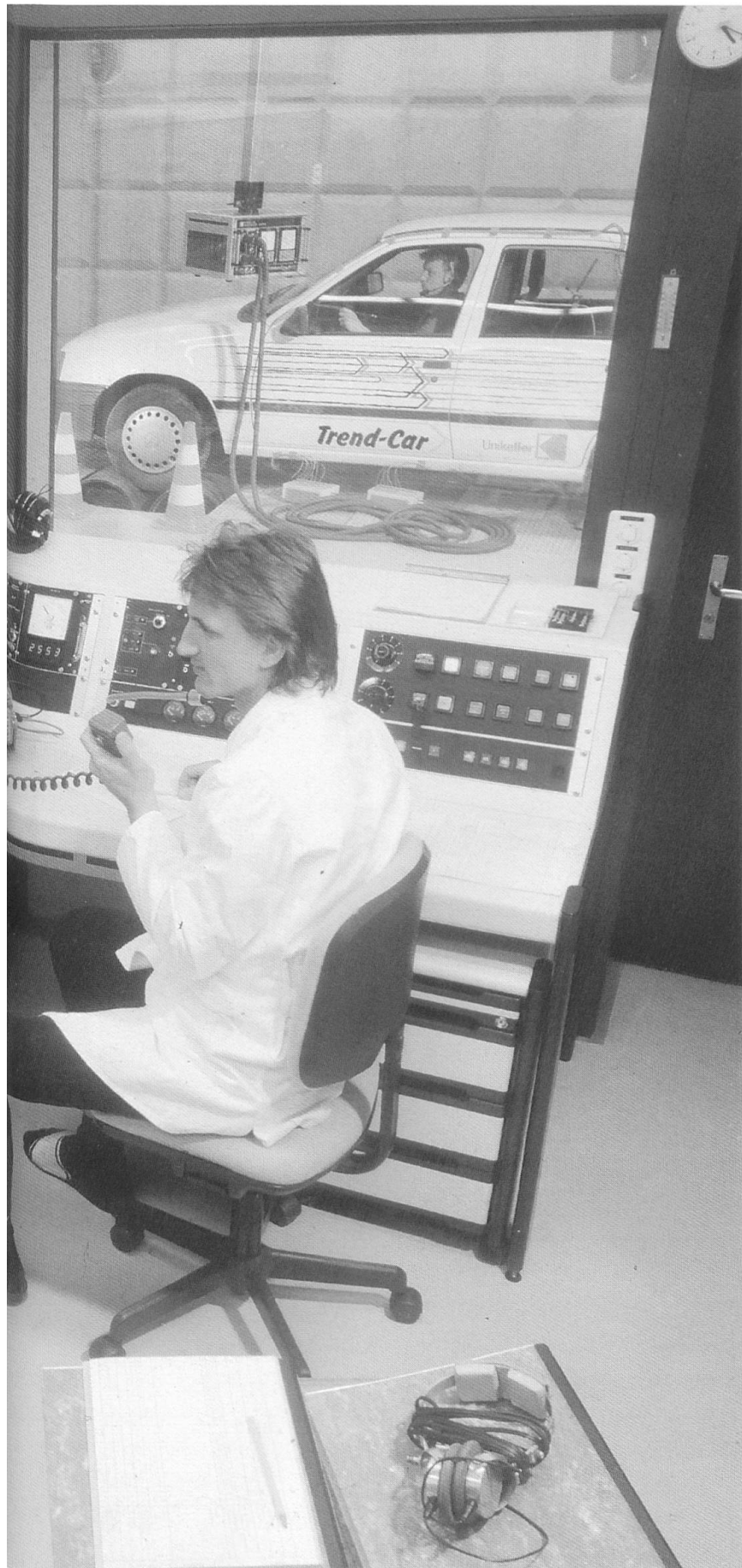
Examples from Unikeller's sphere of activities



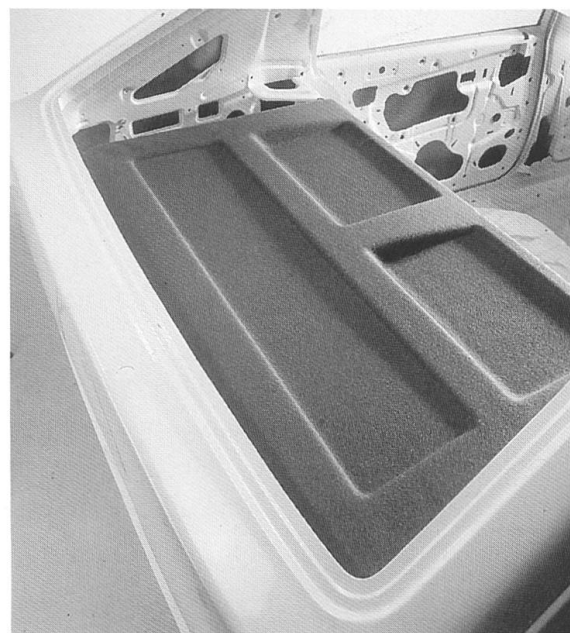
The scientific measurement of noise and heat transfer provides guidance for Unikeller's engineers in their development work.

different systems, depending on their structure. Readily processable «insulation sandwiches» are produced with bonded synthetic rubber or plastic

films. Alternatively, foamed plastics or rubbers in the form of mats can be used. These foamed plastics can be used with open or closed pores, and



In «Trendcars» Unikeller implements new ideas which help the automotive industry to develop serviceable and cost-effective products.



A rear shelf as an example of a multifunctional insulation component

usually also have synthetic rubber or plastic films glued over them to facilitate further processing.

Unfinished elements of both types

are suitable for the installation of accessories such as lights, door handles, window winders, ashtrays, etc. Designed as systems and preforms,

they can be supplied direct to vehicle manufactures, for example, for use in their lean production operations.

The potential synergy with textile technology resulting from the use of textile secondary raw material is obvious. Experience in carpet manufacture and preforms also has to be seen in this context.

The market

Similar to the textile industry and textile machinery manufacture, the automotive industry also goes through changing economic cycles. These fluctuations generally follow a different pattern from those in the textile industry. Since the automotive industry usually brings out new models every five to seven years, Unikeller has to be a proficient R&D partner with its products for this manufacturing sector. Despite the economies which could be achieved by combining production facilities, it must maintain a visible presence close to its customers and in the marketplace.

For example, Volkswagen, Audi, Ford, Opel and Mercedes in Germany, Citroën, Peugeot and Renault in France, and Alfa, Fiat and Lancia in Italy are among Unikeller's main customers, so it is important for the company to be present either in the immediate vicinity of these customers, or in a suitable, central location.

The future

In order to secure and develop good contacts with customers and their research facilities, it is especially important for the division to demonstrate its

scientific credentials at the Unikeller conferences. The company's own research specialists and selected university professors provide the customers' research personnel with information about the latest state of the art. «Trendcars», which need to be «grasped» in intellectual and physical terms, are also shown, for example. Such demonstrations of expertise cement Unikeller's partnership with research staff in their capacity as representatives of the customers and thus assure it of a consultative voice in model changes.

Its experience and success to date give Unikeller cause to believe in a healthy future in which the insulation needs in all forms of transport can be satisfied. Its links with machine manufacturing can also be expanded. Improved building services could, for example, offer unsuspected potential as regards the comfort of living and working conditions. Concentration on the essentials is of vital importance for these major future assignments. The Unikeller Group therefore disposed of its structural metalworking operations in 1987, and of the paints, varnishes and plasters interests in 1988. Chemiegesellschaft Gundershausen with its foamed manufacturing process was acquired in 1988 in order to complement the division's technical expertise. The long-term goal of becoming a universal systems supplier was also brought a step nearer in 1994 with the acquisition of Firth Furnishings Ltd. (England), a company specializing in preformed carpets and interior trim.