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"Roughly every third day, a new roadmarking machine leaves our factory": marketing boss Torsten Pape with the most recently-produced models.

They mark the world's roads *By Elisabeth Meyer*

Rellingen. They have to stick. At minus 50° centigrade in Siberia, at plus 40° in Australia, in extreme downpours in south-east Asia. Everything is possible. With road markings, though, until recently, there has been one fundamental problem: they couldn't be applied when it was raining. But even that is possible now: as the first company in the world, the Hofmann GmbH in Rellingen has succeeded in developing the necessary technology. "The Technical Supervision Authority has just approved the modified machine", says marketing boss Torsten Pape. But it will take at least two or three years until the principle establishes itself in the market.

This innovative technology is not all the tall, bespectacled Marketing Manager is proud of. The medium-sized company, founded in 1952 by Walter Hofmann, is the world's leader in sales of road-marking machines. Every year, around 100 vehicles leave the company's Industriestrasse premises in Rellingen. Pape, who has been with the company for five years now, explains the success of the family-run concern like this: "Speed is the watchword for us. Here, strategic decisions are sometimes reached on the shop-floor in less than ten seconds."

In erecting shop, Saadettin Küçük and Ünal Dogan are just celebrating their birthdays – with original Turkish sweetmeats, and deep-frozen cream slices made in Germany. Colleagues and foremen gather to congratulate them; they even ignore the sometimes deafening roar of the machinery. Küçük, 44, has lived in Germany for the last 26 years. Go back to Turkey? No, no more - "everyone is here, my family, children, friends...". Reminding him of his homeland, amongst all the welding gear, metal components and tools at his workplace there is a map of Turkey.

A few metres away to one side, Jürgen Jandt is bending over, concentrating on a vehicle part. The 67-year-old machine-tool engineer has now been working for the company for 40 years; after his official retirement two years ago, Frank Hofmann persuaded him to return. "I am the general factotum here", says Jandt with a mischievous grin as he wipes the oil off his hands. He enjoys the work, "and the pennies come in useful too", he says, grinning once again. Jandt thinks it will be time to go when Hofmann's son Jan takes over the company shortly, "I am after all something of a luxury...".

In the large conference room above the erecting shop, the marketing boss leans back in his chair. The workforce has increased from 60 to 80 in the last few years. "That is an increase of 33 per cent", stresses Pape. Hofmann has seven engineers on the staff, which is a lot in proportion to the total numbers of staff. The marketing boss is pleased: "Good developers are hard to come by, just the same as qualified specialists". The problem is almost next door: Airbus and Lufthansa between them "strip the market bare", says Pape. The Rellingen family firm cannot hope to compete with their rates of pay anyway; their advantage lies in the fields of job security and a pleasant atmosphere in the workplace.

The technicians travel pretty widely too: as a "global player", the Hofmann company is represented in 41 countries. And while in Germany all efforts are being devoted to saving - the domestic market is only contributing ten per cent to overall sales - other countries are paying out good money to have their roads properly marked: a road-marking lorry costs something like 300,000 Euro; an open model can be obtained at upwards of 45,000 Euro. "Business is booming, particularly in the new EU countries", says Pape.

And whether plain, as in Germany, triple as in South Africa or white-green-white as in the Netherlands; whether dimpled, smooth or structured, as far as Pape is concerned, the type of marking is a matter of "belief" - the most important thing is that markings are there... "Anybody can build an ordinary, plain road", says the marketing boss, with his unpretentious glasses, "but the finishing touch is the marking".