



The company's base at Seefeld, southern Germany.

Solutions at all levels

Warren Clark tracks the history of SVS-Vistek, a German manufacturer, distributor and system consultant in the machine vision industry

The story of SVS-Vistek can be traced back more than 20 years to 1987, when Ulf Weißer began selling electro-optical components to the German market under the name Vistek. Originally, there was no specific focus on the imaging sector as such, but rather a broader offering of optical products, such as photo diodes, PSDs, CCD sensors and so on.

Very early on, though, Weißer negotiated a deal that allowed him to sell the first Dalsa camera in Germany in around 1991, a move that was to pave the way for a new direction for Vistek, with the machine vision market becoming its lifeblood.

Andreas Schaarschmidt, sales and marketing director at SVS-Vistek, has a long history with the vision industry, having joined Stemmer Imaging in 1993, fulfilling a variety of senior roles until leaving to join SVS-Vistek in early 2009. By this time, though, Vistek had

expanded its range of products and had begun to sell, among other imaging components, frame grabbers, software and more.

Walter Denk, a former colleague of Weißer when they both worked for the Dr Seitner Group in the 1980s, joined Vistek in 1998 as a second shareholder and director of the company, at which point its name changed to SVS-Vistek. Denk brought with him a greater focus on software for machine vision solutions as well the distribution rights for Coreco products.

During the following years, the company invested in the development of its own line of manufactured digital cameras. However, SVS-Vistek's entry into manufacturing did not involve investing heavily in factory space, pick-and-place machinery, and so on. 'We are convinced that building affordable, high quality PCBs is something that takes time,'

says Schaarschmidt. 'We choose, therefore, to appoint subcontractors that possess the expertise in manufacturing these components already. They have these processes under control and can manage them much better than we could if we started a manufacturing plant from scratch. Also, of course, it keeps overheads low.'

So, all the product design, software development and camera assembly takes place at SVS-Vistek – but manufacturing of components is handled off-site. 'This allows us to be very flexible with the flow of manufactured components, and we are able to scale production accordingly,' says Schaarschmidt.

The vision market was already competitive in the early 2000s, so it was important to establish a differentiator. 'Our USP at this time was to overclock the renowned Kodak sensor to achieve one of the highest frame rates in the market,' says Schaarschmidt. 'And all without compromising image quality. This is something we continue to do today. For example, we can double the frame rate of Kodak's 40MHz sensor to 80MHz through sophisticated overclocking technology. It is a method we have developed ourselves, and involves many complex techniques to achieve a high level of performance.'

Further investment followed in 2004 to allow SVS-Vistek to become a pioneer in GigE technology, and its first GigE camera was launched that year. 'At the time, only Pleora was talking about GigE, but we used our own knowledge and expertise to develop our own range of GigE cameras,' says Schaarschmidt. 'That was the catalyst for the company growing from a small supplier into a major player in the vision industry.'

One of the principal selling points of SVS-Vistek's GigE cameras was their small size. The SVCam-Eco remains one of the smallest GigE cameras on the market today. This range now sits alongside the high-resolution line, SVCam-HR, and the high-speed line, SVCam-CF.

Today, SVS-Vistek's business model is complex: it is a manufacturer of cameras; it is a distributor of vision components; and it is a system consultant. The company currently employs 26 people at its base in Seefeld, near Munich, but already has plans to expand to 30 in the coming weeks. There is imminent investment planned in R&D, marketing and assembly/production. It still inhabits the same premises it has for more than 20 years, but if growth plans are fulfilled, the team may need to look for a new base in a year or so.



Andreas Schaarschmidt, sales and marketing director at SVS-Vistek.

Since joining SVS-Vistek in 2009, Schaarschmidt's tasks have been to expand the company's international presence. 'I'm responsible for all the external facing elements of the company, such as advertisements and exhibition booths, as well as developing our European partners,' he says. 'We already have

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distribution in Switzerland, Italy and the UK, and have ongoing discussions with partners in France, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Also, Ulf Weißer, our CEO, is well-known in Asia, so there is plenty of opportunity to expand our presence there.'

When it comes to dealing with customers, Schaarschmidt believes SVS-Vistek can do much more than sell them a camera. 'We like to understand the customer's problem

fully,' he says. 'That means looking at all the components, such as illumination, optics, software and so on. We have multiple brands in stock alongside our own products, so we can always select the best solution for the customer. We like to talk to the customer about total cost of ownership, rather than finding the cheapest up-front solution. It can be a tough conversation to have, but we can explain the benefits of certain components over others, thereby offering the customer all our knowledge and expertise during the consultation process.'

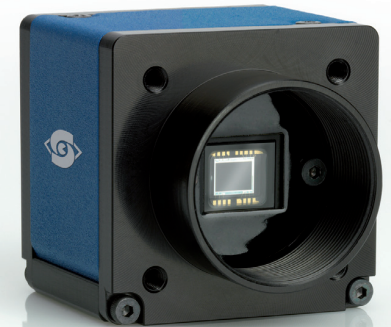
SVS-Vistek also has a clean room facility, allowing it to complete the process of attaching the lens to the camera without fear of dust ingress and so on.

The company has, in spite of economic conditions, ended its financial year reporting more than 10 per cent growth, which is remarkable at a time when others have contracted by 30 per cent or more. Looking forward, Schaarschmidt has many plans to fulfil. 'We are looking to stabilise our distribution channels,' he says. 'But we're also working on new products. We're investing in dual GigE output, which offers more than 200Mb/s, as well as a new camera family based on the Kodak four-tap sensor.'

'We're always looking for new technologies or new ways to use sensors,' concludes Schaarschmidt. 'We don't simply want to come out with "me too" products.'

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