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Interview with Dr. Markus Heering, Managing Director of VDMA Printing and Paper Technology Association

"drupa is important for getting back into business"

For months, Covid-19 has paralyzed large sections of public life. In an interview, Dr. Markus Heering, Managing Director of the VDMA Printing and Paper Technology Association, explains how drupa 2021 is planned under Corona-conditions, as well as what he expects of the, to nine days shortened, world's leading trade fair (April 20 to 28, 2021).

How is the crisis affecting suppliers of printing and paper technology?

Suppliers of printing and paper technology are just as affected by the Corona crisis as other areas of mechanical and plant engineering. Incoming orders and sales are suffering massively. However, the commercial print sector is hit harder than the packaging sector, whose products are considered to be system relevant in many regions due to the high hygiene requirements. Overall the consequences are noticeable, customers shy away from investments, machines can neither be delivered nor put into operation, and service visits to customers are not possible in many regions. Only in Europe we are observing an easing of the situation.

The drupa is also affected. After the postponement, the trade fair was shortened to nine days. What is your trade association's position on this decision?

There was no alternative to the postponement because in June an officially ordered ban on meetings and events came into force. The postponement had to take into account both, the international trade fair calendar and other events organized by Messe Düsseldorf. This is because, including set-up and dismantling, drupa is blocking the exhibition grounds for several weeks. The new date of April 20 – 28, 2021 is a compromise which we fully support. Of course we hope that the pandemic is largely over by then, however we must be realistic. Already today, fewer international visitors will participate than at drupa 2016, due to global travel restrictions. Hence the shortened duration of nine days was a wish of our member companies. The duration is long enough for

running machines to be presented. At the same time, it is short enough to avoid lack time due to the reduced number of visitors.

Do you expect a "normal" trade fair despite all the uncertainty regarding the risk of infection or travel restrictions?

drupa has never been a normal trade fair. As the industry's leading trade fair, with its event character, long duration and rich supporting programme, it is a role model for trade fair organisers all over the world. What we can implement in April 2021 depends on Covid-19. Are the infection rates decreasing? Is a vaccine on the way? Because there is no answer to this question, we should start from the status quo in order to plan on a solid basis. This includes a hygiene concept that Messe Düsseldorf has developed with the responsible authorities. The new "normality" of our lives includes masks, distance and hygiene rules, which will also be part of drupa. I think we would do well not to make any comparisons with earlier drupas and to acknowledge the new normality. Corona will probably stay for quite some time and we have to find ways to get back to normal business, and for this we also need drupa 2021!

The consequences of the pandemic are reducing the resources of many companies. To what extent could this affect their trade fair activities?

First exhibitors have cancelled their participation. I understand that entrepreneurs shy away from investment and the risk of infection for their employees at this time. In crises it is important to maintain liquidity, but at the same time it is important to return to normality and to send a clear message to customers: "we believe in business again and want to enter into dialogue with you! The chain of customers and providers holding on to their money, must be broken at some point. I hope that despite the crisis, as many companies as possible will decide to come to drupa and that all of us there will give the signal to start again.

Some exhibitors are experimenting with virtual events and live streams. Can such formats replace a trade fair presence?

No. Although the experience has been very positive. The companies report that they reach different target groups with virtual events than at trade fairs. The Live Streams bring the second, third and fourth levels of companies together with existing customers. In contrast, the first level meets at trade fairs - and new customers or customers of other providers also take advantage of the opportunity to obtain non-binding information. Virtual events are an additional, complementary channel that will find a firm place in marketing however it will not be able to replace the personal exchange and eye contact.

For international visitors who will not be able to travel in April 2021, virtual formats are an access option. Should the fair offer them?

It must and will do so! After all, it is important to bring visitors from key markets who are unable to travel to the event. We need a digital drupa that suitably complements the real event with digital formats - with all the drawbacks that such a digital format entail. We know from discussions with Messe Düsseldorf that they are intensively involved around this topic.

Platform Economy is one of the megatrends at drupa 2021, so should the trade fair position itself in terms of digital platforms?

Like machine manufacturers, service providers and users, it should address this trend and build a platform for virtual events. All trade fairs are working on such concepts, especially since their exhibitors are making this request. However, when it comes to such requests, we should not forget that Covid-19 has also had a massive impact on the trade fair companies. They cannot currently draw on the full potential of such investments.

Every four years drupa takes a look at the future of our industry. Are there any topics and trends that you are particularly looking forward to this time?

I am curious to see which solutions the exhibitors will present for the four megatrends of drupa 2021, i.e. **Artificial Intelligence, Connected Customers, Platform Economy** and **Circular Economy**. Digitization is leading to ever faster innovation cycles, and the Corona crisis is acting as an additional catalyst. Some companies are pushing their research and development even more intensively than before. I think that at drupa 2021 we will see new developments that in just a few years' time will be an integral part of the printing industry's process chains and business workflows. drupa is all about visions, ideas and the future - and under the impact of the Corona pandemic this is more important than ever. If we succeed in making our industry visible, perceptible and tangible in all its diversity, then we can speak of a successful drupa 2021, regardless of the number of visitors or exhibitors.

The VDMA Printing and Paper Technology Association is the mouthpiece of manufacturers of equipment and systems for printing and print finishing, paper production and processing, and auxiliary equipment and devices. Together with the Forschungsgesellschaft Druckmaschinen e.V. (FGD) and PrintPromotion GmbH, the trade association offers its members services, for example on topics such as trade fairs, public relations, technology and research.