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Board Material Market – Dealer’s View

TEHNOPLIT company has been working in cash-and-carry and wholesale wood-based board business for more than twenty years, and has operated for thirteen of these years as an official dealer of EGGER international company in the Moscow Region. We have talked to Gennady Yegorushkin, CEO of TEHNOPLIT, about upsides and downsides of cooperation with the renowned manufacturer.

- This year your company will celebrate its twentieth anniversary. What was the start of the enterprise history? Have there been any changes in operational areas over these years?

Twenty years is quite a long journey. The products we offer have not had any significant changes over the years. These are primarily chipboards and laminated chipboards, polished and laminated MDF boards, plastics and edges. The demand for these products has not only been stable, but has grown significantly. This is, among other, due to the construction business development. In the early years of our operations we were selling board materials by Sheksna and Cherepovets mills. The status of EGGER official dealer, naturally, became a significant step forward for us. And the demand for laminated chipboards has only been growing over the years, and so has their quality. The cooperation with a large industrial brand has enabled us to expand our product range: we got various décor boards and a broader mix of laminated products. We focused on production services and deliveries, which is imperative in our time.

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- Has the customer structure changed? If estimated in percentage terms, are there more furniture manufacturing businesses now?

In 2005 we started out our operations with sales of board materials for furniture makers. Now our customers include furniture manufacturers, construction companies and exhibition space developers. Generally, all major furniture companies are still with us. And small businesses constantly change: some go and others come. Manufacturing is a cost-intensive process, many lack investments in early stages and have to close down. These are replaced by new individual entrepreneurs, and some even manage to grow into major production companies. And we are happy to continue our cooperation with them, giving us larger and larger orders.

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- Looking back, how has the board material market changed overall? Which years, in your view, were your "heyday"?

Each year was different in some way, it would be hard to identify some specific year. In terms of profit, the latest few years have been the most successful, despite various crisis periods. But these have had a significant effect on rising EGGER product profit margins versus the previous period of about up to 2019. And this is especially important for us, because TEHNOPLIT company is a mono-brand dealer. We get over 90% of our product range directly from the manufacturer plants. Also, starting from about 2019 we had introduced a concept of recommended prices for all official dealers. This situation is advantageous both for us as dealers, and for our customers: they can choose a supplier by selecting better services, because everyone provides high quality – all dealers get certified official products with rather similar prices.

- How did the market in Russia survive the crisis years of 2020 and 2022? What was the toughest challenge for your business over the period?

Everyone went through a rough patch during the pandemic. As for recovery, it was relatively swift, all industries of the economy pulled each other out. As soon as construction had resumed en masse, we saw order numbers soar. Of course, not all furniture market players could survive the forced stoppage and make it to demand recovery. The latest customers to join the fray after the lifting of the restrictions on major public events were those who developed exhibition spaces. These companies had to deal with significant employee turnover rates due to the downtime period, but many managed to pull through. The pandemic came as an unexpected shock for all businesses. We were forced to upgrade our customer relations approaches in many aspects, using various sales tools to keep our customer base. We put a greater emphasis on online communications channels and developed individual interaction plans for our regular customers, carefully managed promotional activities and events. One could say this was a very good stress test, which helped us pull through 2022 with ease and keep our customers. And I should note that we always felt support by EGGER.

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- How does the partner company help you, apart from direct supplies?

I could call it “team spirit”. We are never alone during hard times. We are provided with high-quality analytics, recommendations based on our experience, our inventory status and our customer requests are monitored. This happens not only in the times of crises. I can always call for help, get support not only in the form of material supply, but in marketing and sales as well. For example, our customers point out that over the latest years our managers have improved their knowledge of product and manufacturing specifics. This happens largely due to EGGER workshops for brand managers in dealership teams. Today our customers get not only board materials for their projects, but also receive required information: from safety certificates to special guidelines on making furniture from our materials. This is an important service, often overlooked by many companies outside of the dealer network, which is a mistake. We also get assistance from a professional marketing team for showroom design, creative advertisement ideas etc. One could say this helps us reduce costs in these areas.

- So, this means essentially working as a large team towards a common goal?

Quite so. EGGER is constantly expanding its product mix and offering new services. We should keep pace with them and offer a comprehensive inventory program with relevant services to our customers. The crisis years taught us to value all customers: small and medium businesses, individual entrepreneurs. We continue to use individualized approach to their requests. For example, when we see a growing market of design services in construction and furniture making, we upgrade a showroom for convenient selection of required materials and getting advice. A designer could come to us with his customer and hold a meeting at our site, and then take his project to a special contest by our partner. This is a very good start for many beginner designers and architects, and these services are free. We view such events as a contribution to the future of the overall industry.

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- Are there many designers among your customers, or there are still more furniture makers?

Of course, furniture manufacturers are in the lead. Many of them employ their own designers, having a say about which materials are to be used for this or that project. But there are design studios, purchasing directly from us, and then implementing their projects with construction and furniture contractors. There are just a few of those, and we can see that their services are in demand. These days, companies developing exhibition spaces are on the rise again. And we see a very interesting trend in terms of design and construction with these companies. There was a time when they tried to move away from wood materials in favor of metals and glass, but now they are back to boards, actively interested in new decorative boards in our range. Their orders are primarily based on polished MDF boards and chipboards, white laminated chipboards. But laminated MDF and plastics are also in demand for stand decor.

- TEHNOPLIT is maintaining and expanding its presence in the Moscow Region. What is your near-term outlook for your company and the board material market? Is the peak crisis period over?

It is hard to say, because we are still on our way to recovery after the pandemic, and five years have passed since. In 2024 TEHNOPLIT company demonstrated 6% growth in the sales of Eurodekor laminated chipboards in square meters versus 2020. This isn’t a small number, but the current sales are only 88% of the pre-crisis year of 2019. There is room for our growth not only in laminated chipboards, but in other materials too. As for the overall market, introduction of new products and services, improved board quality, higher product profit margins and competitive advantages could unlock good prospects for all brands. But it should be kept in mind, that we are heavily dependent on related sectors. For example, all our colleagues are closely following the real estate market situation, mortgage loan changes. All of these will have an impact on whether people would want to buy housing, decorate, order furniture. We should not overlook any changes, business seasonality, issues in related industries, and we should be quite flexible to be able to operate under any conditions.

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