

Norwegian hydraulics, pneumatics, and associated technologies firm SERVI Group has a long and proud history and shows every indication of maintaining that success – even helping out with the country’s Covid-19 efforts. James Wills reports.

Historical
Merit

**FIRM AT THE
FOREFRONT OF TECHNOLOGICAL
EXPERTISE**

IN February 2020, Covid-19 began to rampage throughout Europe. Health authorities struggling to treat patients reached out to companies in a desperate bid to quickly produce life-saving emergency ventilators.

In Norway, the country’s Defence and Research Establishment asked the technological experts at SERVI Group – better known as a hydraulics company in the oil industry – if they could assist with a solution.

The company immediately assigned a third of its engineers to the project to work alongside the Norwegian medical equipment firm Laerdal Medical. And as Executive Vice President and Chief Technology Officer Morten Brøvig-Thomassen explained, time was of the essence.

“At this particular point in time, it was literally a life and death situation,” he stressed. “The quicker these ventilators could be

designed and manufactured, the more lives would be saved. Numerous other companies were given the same task but by working 24/7, I am delighted to say SERVI and Laerdal Medical won the contract and ramped up to supply 1,000 emergency ventilators in a very short time span.

“I think this ventilator project perfectly demonstrates the versatility and entrepreneurial spirit that SERVI possesses. The ability to develop new products and solutions in new industries is a skill that we will look to build on for the future,” added Henning Middtun who joined the company as Vice President, Business Development earlier this year.

The ventilator project is a success story which humanises SERVI’s strengths because as Vice President, Development Nils Harald Flaa laughingly admitted, hydraulics, pneumatics, actuators and flange valves are rarely hot topics of conversation over dinner tables: “When we start talking about work, all our friends say, ‘what on earth are you going on about?’”

The truth is, of course, fluid power systems and similar technologies which SERVI produces are vital cogs in a huge



Henning Middtun, Vice President, Business Development



Morten Brøvig-Thomassen, Chief Technology Officer



Nils Harald Flaa, Vice President, Development



array of maritime and industrial sectors, and SERVI is a world leader in making and distributing them.

"We produce a large number of products, many of which are worldwide recognised brands," added Mr Flaa. "For example, Hydranor is a leading brand in manifolds and control valves for large cranes and winches to the marine market worldwide, and the quality and diversity of our product range means we still carry and produce spares for machinery we produced in the 1960s and 1970s.

Renowned reputation

SERVI is a true manufacturer in that it takes the raw material to make components and then assemble the finished product. These are typically specially-designed large systems, custom made in accordance with customer requirements for when an off-the-shelf product is not an option.

Hydraulic technology is by far the biggest part of SERVI's turnover, accounting roughly for two-thirds of trade.

"We sell high numbers of some off-the-shelf products such as winch manifolds and hydraulic cylinders for the marine industry, but SERVI's edge is not in being a mass volume producer," remarked Mr Midttun.

"We are perhaps more renowned for being a one-stop-shop for customers with one-off specialised projects. They know our company has a longstanding reputation for engineering, product and application knowledge, especially in the offshore and marine sectors. They will approach us with a project and we design solutions for them." Mr Brøvig-Thomassen added.

"Our company has more than 100 years of experience in hydraulics and a unique competence in integrating various products into hydraulic systems for a wide range of applications."



SERVI is also a market leader in integrating increasing amounts of digitalisation in its products.

"Integrated condition-based monitoring is of increasing importance in all technological fields," highlighted Mr Brøvig-Thomassen. "Our technology is often used in challenging environments and so performance monitoring with sensors helps clients to be able to monitor the health condition on their equipment and to reduce energy consumption. Predictive maintenance will identify problems before they occur, and customers can be sent the relevant spare parts in anticipation of this.

In the maritime sector, with so many new ships being built in the Far East, is SERVI

not handicapped by being 4,200 miles from the Chinese shipyards, for example?

Mr Flaa said not. "The tailor-made equipment we produce is so specialised there is not a great deal of competition in the market for it. Far Eastern manufacturers tend to concentrate on making hydraulic systems where the volumes are higher, for the agricultural sector for example, and so our specialisation and reputation means our products are still in demand."

Adapt and grow

In terms of its customer base, SERVI has long focused on serving the demands of the oil and gas sector which, admitted Mr Brøvig-Thomassen, can be challenging.

"One of the biggest issues we face, like many companies, are the peaks and troughs in the oil market," he commented. "When oil prices are high there is naturally more investment in the infrastructure which uses our technology; when the price falls, so does demand.

"However, we recognise the cyclic nature of such fluctuations and plan for them. SERVI's history dates back to 1912 and throughout our history we have constantly evolved, adapting to market changes with new technologies, bringing new approaches and specialities to the business as required. Its longstanding dominance and reputation in its various sectors means a third of its turnover is based on maintenance and servicing its existing products (for example its product catalogue covers hundreds of pages of everything from linear actuators in its electromechanics section to ATEX certified



windscreen wipers used on ships and oil rigs across the globe).

In addition to the more traditional oil and gas industries, SERVI is also busy in the alternative energy sector - an industry in which Norway, as a nation, is a technological pace-setter.

"If you compare an offshore oil installation with installation of an offshore windfarm there are many similarities, particularly in the heavy power motion control systems our products are part of," continued Mr Brøvig-Thomassen.

"We have had a number of contracts to create and supply systems to windfarm installation vessels - not so much with the pitch and yaw controls of the wind turbines themselves - but we are exploring such opportunities with the turbine manufacturers as well."

This emphasis on green technology also applies to SERVI's own products, suggested Mr Flaa.

"Whenever we develop new products they have to meet some of the United Nation's 17 sustainable environment goals, be it reducing pollution by being less reliant on oil in our systems, or saving energy. If it doesn't meet these goals, it doesn't get developed."

Future mindset

Employing 320 people in eight Norwegian coastal sites, SERVI looks set to continue to adapt and grow.

"While we are still expecting the maritime and oil and gas sector to generate a large chunk of revenues for SERVI in the coming years, we are also aggressively pursuing growth in new segments, such as aquaculture and offshore wind," revealed Mr Midttun. "We see that our industrial competence as a manufacturer and system integrator, in combination with our focus on high quality, also have a high value outside our typical customer base."

The company is seeing increasing demand for its specialty products in aquaculture, where SERVI - developed and man-

ufactured technology is helping with not just installing fish farm infrastructure, but also in processing and transferring the farmed fish. And as for Covid-19, SERVI implemented the usual working practice changes commonly adapted worldwide, but how did it affect turnover?

"Rather strangely, and thankfully, our turnover in 2020 was similar to 2019," Mr Flaa said.

One suspects that might not have been the same for all companies in this industry, but SERVI's adaptability and reputation may have gone a long way in helping it see off the worst of the virus economic effects, just as its engineers did their very best to help save lives during it. ■



Demonstration of the Laerdal Servi emergency ventilators. Credit: Laerdal Medical

