

Doing it the Collé way

You might be forgiven for thinking that Netherlands based rental company Collé is a relatively new company that is expanding rapidly. However the business was founded more than 110 years ago, when at the end of the 1800s the family business started selling agricultural machinery. In the past 15 years it has expanded rapidly particularly in the rental sector and now has revenues of almost €60 million.



Frans (Left) and Frits Collé

As well as distributing numerous well-known brands including Manitou, Magni, Genie, Aichi, H.A.B, Palfinger, Kramer Allrad, Gehl and Wacker Neuson it has a rental fleet of 3,500 machines, made up of aerial lifts and towers, telehandlers, forklifts, earthmoving equipment, site accommodation as well as having an event and special project divisions. Mark Darwin visited the company to find out more.

According to Frans Collé - the grandson of the founder and father of current owner Frits Collé - the company is a "big business but small - one that can make major purchasing decisions worth millions in seconds".

What makes this quick decision-making process possible is its flat management structure, small management team and the understanding gained over many years between the major directors - Frits, Frans and sales director Jean Schreurs - who has been with the

company since 1976. However over the past few years as the company has grown staff numbers have risen to more than 200 and with as many operations as possible carried out in-house, this must be increasingly difficult?

19th century company

The business was founded by Mathias Collé selling agricultural machinery in Selfkant, Germany's most westerly town, just a few miles from its current head office in Sittard, Netherlands. It has (and has always had) one single shareholder, currently owner and managing director Frits Collé. Frits is the fourth generation Collé and son of the previous owner/managing director Frans Collé. Frans passed on the company to his son in 2005 with the intention to 'take things easier' but loves the company so much that he is still found at work every day, probably working harder than ever!

For the best part of a century the company concentrated on agriculture equipment in the local



area. In 1963 it opened a depot in Limbricht (NL) and then in 1977 moved to a 10,000 square metres premises in Sittard. Expansion meant another move in 2011 just up the road to its current head office, a 50,000 square metre facility that was an ex-Daf and Volvo parts manufacturing facility, as well as retaining the older building which is also used for the storage of 1,500 accommodation units and cabin refurbishment workshops.

Through the 1980s it added to its product portfolio, importing garden and landscaping machinery (such as Goldoni and Toro) as well as industrial cleaning equipment from Kärcher. More brands were added during the 1990s with Neuson, Kramer, Manitou and Wumag (Palfinger) but the game-changing event that transformed the company was in 1998 when it sold its John Deere dealership.

"At that time sales in the agriculture sector were very poor and we decided to concentrate more on supplying construction equipment - excavators, aerial lifts, forklifts and

telehandlers - as well as starting a rental division," says sales director Jean Schreurs. "With this change of direction we opened depots in Utrecht, Bremen and Hamburg and over the past few years have moved into our larger head office in Sittard as well as opening depots in Osnabrück, Germany, Eemshaven and a new 8,200 square metre depot in Groningen, Netherlands which is being extended by an additional 1,500 square metres this summer."

The company also has plans to add a further depot in the west of Holland and one in Belgium but it is the four depots that are planned for Germany that will almost double its rental and sales area coverage. This is needed as Collé plans to double its revenues in the next two to three years, with equal contributions from its rental and sales divisions.

Collé has been selling Manitou telehandlers since 1996 but it is only a dealer for a relatively small geographic area near its head office, covering Limburg and Utrecht in the Netherlands and Limburg in



Collé is looking to expand the attachments it sells with this boom mounted façade

Part of its 50,000 sq m facility in Sittard



Collé is a big Manitou access and telehandler user



Belgium. Frans Collé's long-term association with Riccardo Magni (previously of Manitou and founder of Magni telehandlers) is obviously part of the reason that it was recently appointed distributor for Magni telehandlers in the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany and Austria. With ambitious growth plans Collé needs to be expanding its new equipment sales and with a small Manitou territory Magni was an ideal opportunity.

Collé is a big Manitou user - both access and telehandlers - and claims to have the largest rental fleet - around 100 units - of Manitou 360 degree telehandlers in Europe. But with growth in mind it will be promoting Magni machines, both within its rental fleet and via sales throughout its large territory. Other manufacturer's it represents include Palfinger, Wacker Neuson and Kramer in the Netherlands and for H.A.B. for the whole Benelux region.

Sittard head office

The Sittard head office is the hub of the whole operation. Collé has always aimed to do everything

in-house, claiming that it is 'quicker, cheaper and easier to monitor. With the company growing so much it has had to expand its internal systems to cope, creating a specific purchasing manager, and IT computer department - it is currently installing a new computer system linking all branches - security, transport and even in-house machine decal and stickers. It is truly still run like a family business, where the experience of the long-serving staff - some have been at the company for more almost 50 years - blends seamlessly with new recruits. The company has four divisions - new and used sales, rental, events and projects - however it is the sales and rental divisions that work closest together on purchasing and rent to buy deals.

"Unlike UK the Dutch/Belgian mentality means it is perfectly ok for companies to sell and rent," says Schreurs. "We started as a sales company and then went into rental. The revenue split is currently about 50/50 between the two divisions."

Head office facility

The new head office in Sittard is very well specified with enough space for offices, workshops (including a 32 tonne overhead crane), parts and new equipment storage and more than adequate yard space for the rental fleet.

All new machines are delivered to head office with Pre Delivery Inspections being carried out before they are shipped to customers. Over €2 million worth of spare parts - 20,000 line items - are also on site both for the new equipment and maintenance or repair of rental units. The parts holding is kept

Collé has many other types of machinery and tools



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relatively low, as many parts are supplied directly from the manufacturer to the customer and many are delivered via the overnight delivery service. Major repairs are also carried out in Sittard.

"Damaged rental machines are brought here for repair so the workshops are always kept very busy," says Schreurs.

The company is also keen to use the latest technology and has most of its rental machines fitted with a track and trace system. "This is a significant investment, but we can see if rental machines are being worked evenings or weekends and

"Germany and Benelux will be our focus over the next few years. We have no intention of setting up in the markets such as the UK, although we do cross-hire machines into the UK and Ireland. We recently supplied two 30 metre telehandlers on a long-term cross-hire to a company in Ireland. Although our company colour is blue, machines that are likely to be cross-hired into Germany, Belgium, UK and Ireland to other rental companies are painted white so we can apply the other company's logos. I mean other rental companies do not want to be cross-hiring a machine in Collé colours."



Site units, forklifts and booms - Collé has such a wide range of equipment

stolen machines stand a good chance of being recovered. Last month we found a stolen machine working for a competitor just six kilometres from Sittard."

German expansion

Growth of the next few years is centred on expanding into Germany. Collé already has depots in Bremen, Hamburg and Osnabruck in the north and has identified several different areas where it would like to site new depots.

"We are actively looking to add depots in these different areas and are interested in acquiring a company," adds Frans Collé. "We are financially very healthy and now past the pre-crisis levels of 2008. Revenues this year will be about €60 million with the last few years being some of our best ever."

"Even through the crisis years we always made a profit and now it is time to continue our expansion. I think it is realistic to double our sales of new equipment over the next two to three years, particularly with the geographic expansion and with new brands such as Magni."

"The rental side of the business is going well, although rates are under pressure - there are just too many machines in Europe," he says.

Decisions in seconds

"Because our senior management team is still small we can and often do make decisions to purchase equipment worth millions in seconds," says Frans Collé. "We do not have or have ever had budgets for equipment purchases. Because we have such a good understanding, we don't need meetings. We do what we have to and everything is under control."

As well as being sole shareholder and owner of the company Frits is general director and mainly in charge of the rental division, Schreurs controls the sales and Frans keeps an overall watch on proceedings.

"We have a healthy steady growth but this is because we enjoy working and it is a challenge," says Frans. "We don't need to grow but, we want to. Work is a passion and if we can satisfy customers with good machines, good brands and use our own transport then it is all worthwhile. That is why we do everything ourselves."

Equipment

"We do look for new brands to sell but only good quality ones. Keeping to the brand leaders for the rental equipment means good resale demand and values," says Schreurs.

Collé moved into its new premises in Sittard in 2011

C&a

collé



"For example we have truck mounted platforms on Mercedes and other chassis and although the Mercedes is more expensive to buy it has a far better resale value and demand from countries around the world than the other brands."

"Our favourite brand is Manitou and the company has around 500 machines in the fleet and about a 100 360 degree telehandlers and this figure is rising. The most popular sizes are nine, 16 and 18 metres with the 21 metre being the most popular roto as well as the 25 metre machines.

"We have no demand at all for a 20 metre fixed frame (such as the new JCB540-200) although I think Manitou will bring out something similar," says Frans Collé. Unable to extend its Manitou dealership, Collé has taken on Magni telehandlers and is its largest distributor in terms of geographic area as it includes Germany and Austria as well as Benelux.

"The Magni have many good features, but as they are a relatively new company the growth so far has been slow but this will pick up rapidly," says Schreurs. "As well as the 360 degree machines to 30 metres, there has been big interest in the 32 and 35 tonne capacity heavy duty machines. The Magni telehandlers have several excellent features such as the improved visibility pressurised cabs, with standard air conditioning and good capacities for the size of machine."

"Demand for 360 degree telehandlers is growing. In Holland it represents almost half of all telehandler demand, as they can replace a small crane, access platform or forklift. They are also subject to less damage and are safer as they do not travel around the site as much, setting up and working from a central position. Customers

are taking more and more attachments as well. Forks, man basket, winch or jib winch are the most popular so it is being used as a true multi-purpose machine."

The company also has around 150 tracked Aichi boom lifts in the rental fleet, although as it is now the H.A.B importer, it is slowly replacing these with the HAB machines. Collé also has 'special' machines in the rental division such as the 150ft JLG 1500SP boom, the 103 metre Palfinger WT1000 truck mounted lift, 30 metre 360 degree telehandlers from Manitou and Magni, Mec Titan boom and 32 metre Holland Lift scissors. Machines on order include the new 180ft Genie SX180 boom lift and the new 90 metre Palfinger P900 mounted on a commercial chassis - both launched at Bauma.

"We have ordered the new lighter P900 which is mounted on a five-axle 48 tonne Scania chassis 700kg platform capacity, and depending on how it performs we have an option on three more," says Schreurs. "Also

The company distributes Magni telehandlers in The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany and Austria





The company has such a wide range of equipment including Palfinger, Palazzani and Manitou

on order are several SX180 booms for delivery early next year. Again the first we will try out and then evaluate the order."

"We have been partners with Palfinger/Wumag for many years and are very happy with their products. We have 100 Palfinger truck mounts in the fleet from 12 to 103 metres and would be happy to buy whatever it produces - if it was a new 120 metre platform we would buy it. We are also pleased with the Palfinger Italy development as it gives us a smaller 20 metre truck mount in the range for the future."

Sole rental agreements

The company has many sole supply equipment rental agreements for large contracts all over Europe. Depending on the number of machines supplied, Collé will base engineers on site for technical support. The company is also heavily involved in a new social responsibility strategy and certification that is now required in the Netherlands which means companies must show that they are actively reducing their eco footprint with activities such as recycling and reducing the amount of fuel used.



A few of its Aichi tracked booms

"We are one of the first companies that will have the full certification which has become a big issue in Holland over the past two years,"

says Schreurs. "It is just one more development that makes the company better and stronger."

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