



STS: an innovative company serving the watchmaking industry

A major supplier of surface treatments for the WATCH industry, STS is constantly innovating, in particular by offering an alternative to rhodium, the price of which has exploded in recent months. It has also recently strengthened its management, which is essentially family-owned.

Janine Vuilleumier

Frédéric Saulcy, a passionate electroplating specialist founded STS (Saulcy Traitement de Surface) in 2006, based in Le Sentier. He was joined by Thierry Mesnier, who helped him manage the company. The firm, which offers various surface treatments for watchmakers, soon found itself in a cramped

space and moved to new premises in the village. In order to foster closer contacts with its customers, two branches were opened in La Chaux-de-Fonds (2010) and Meyrin (2017), while the Jura site in Develier began operating in 2016. This branch became the first company to diversify its activities (aluminium anodising) and serve sectors such as the connectors and automotive industries.

Today, the four entities, covering the entire Jura Arc, employ some 120 people.

Throughout the last 15 years, STS has continued to evolve, offering new decorative processes, expanding the range of colours and equipping itself with a state-of-the-art laboratory. The electroplating baths (six manual lines and one automatic) currently most of the building in Le Sentier, alongside varnishing, sandblasting, polishing, heat treatment and decoration workshops, thus offering a wide range of component finishing options. This site also houses the R&D department, where new treatments such as black NAC are developed.



Polishing

Black NAC

Three years of research and development, in collaboration with the University of Franche-Comté, have led to the development of this new decorative coating. Mainly intended for movement decoration, it lends a deep black appearance to the surfaces it covers. It is non-

magnetic, compliant with REACH and RoHS as well as ISO 2819 and NIHS 96-50 standards. This exclusive treatment has been patented.

White platinum to replace rhodium

Consistently on the cutting edge of technology, STS recently presented an alternative to rhodium, the precious metal used to coat many movement components. In just a few months, the price of this raw material has risen to unprecedented heights, becoming the most expensive metal in the world (around 900,000 francs per kilo), as demand for this material has risen sharply, mainly in the automotive sector. Moreover, its extraction is limited, with only about 20 tonnes produced per year, mainly from mines in South Africa.

As one of the largest consumers of rhodium in Switzerland, STS naturally sought an alternative to this precious metal. The first question Frédéric Saulcy asked himself when tackling this project was why ébauches (blanks) are historically rhodium-plated. There is apparently no technical reason to do so. However, it soon became clear that this metal gives the components an attractive white finish, while the specialist also noted with certainty that rhodium is the easiest plating system to use in electroplating, which is why it was already used by the farmer-watchmakers of yesteryear.

The STS engineers therefore set about finding an alternative that would give the watch components the same finish at a lower cost. White platinum soon emerged as the material that met the required technical characteristics (same colour, same finish). Unlike rhodium, platinum production is not limited and its costs are much more stable. The new coating, which has been available since the beginning of the year, is already attracting a lot of interest from STS customers.

Certifications

While Frédéric Saulcy is keen to offer his customers innovative, state-of-the-art coatings, he also attaches great importance to certifications. All four STS entities are Responsible Jewellery Council and ISO Environmen-

tal 14001 certified. The Develier site, which serves the automotive and medical sectors, is ISO 9001, VDA 6.3 and IATF 16949 certified.

Family governance

Active in the family business since 2014, Elisabeth Saulcy now shares the executive management of the four STS sites as joint CEO alongside her brother, Frédéric. An excellent manager, Elisabeth oversees all operations of the four entities. The Acrotec group, which the company joined in 2014, welcomes this family-run and feminised joint management approach, which is a perfect match with its DNA.

Future

Now supported by his sister as co-CEO, Frédéric Saulcy can devote himself entirely to his

passion for electroplating. In the R&D department, assisted by several young engineers, he is currently working on a new coating that will be the subject of a ninth patent in this field. Developing collaborations with universities and colleges and devoting more time to the training of apprentices is also a priority for this company director who loves to share his passion.

Meanwhile, Elisabeth Saulcy is preparing new certifications (ISO 9001 and EQUAL SALARY) dedicated to the four STS sites. And the future is also taking shape through the new generation of employees already working in the company. Johanne, Frédéric's daughter, is in charge of quality for the four STS entities. Gaëlle, Thierry Mesnier's daughter, also an electroplating specialist, runs the Sentier site. A solid foundation has therefore been laid for this local company which is set to enjoy continued growth. To achieve this, it will soon double its production area at Le Sentier. ◦



Laboratories