

The future is now

By Katja Teixeira, Marketing, Thomas Magnete GmbH, Herdorf

More than ever before, we are living in the age of the car. Against this backdrop, the claim of this year's IAA event to be 'the world's most automobile show' would seem highly appropriate. For some, a car is a means to an end, while for others it represents luxury; for most, it is probably something in between. At the same time, the car defines the day-to-day working lives of manufacturers, salespeople and suppliers involved in safety, chassis, bodywork and fuel - not to mention electronics, an area that is becoming increasingly important. Only those who can come up with practical innovations while maintaining a focus on the needs of both consumers and the environment can hope to succeed within this market. Future-oriented developments seldom come as a surprise; they tend to be the product of continual research, often carried out over a period of years.

For this reason, the future is not something that will happen in years to come: the future is now. Twenty-five years ago, virtually nobody could have foreseen the extent to which innovations such as diesel particulate filtering and mobile Internet with personalised apps for vehicle computers would become standard issue in the automobile sector; yet the foundations for these developments were already in place at the time.

Hard facts are not everything

So where are the trends leading? It is easy to make assumptions based on the present situation: fuel consumption will continue to fall, comfort levels will rise

(even in vehicles of lower classes) and networking will be enhanced as the possibilities for communication improve. We might say the car will evolve into a comfortable, environmentally compatible unit of communication. For a more detailed picture of where developments are taking us, though, we need look no further than this year's IAA. While many of the ideas on show will not progress beyond the stage of studies and research projects, many others will emerge as standard over the next few years.

What, then, do suppliers in the automotive field need to be fit for the future? Apart from practical innovations for the business world and consistent corporate

management, we can pinpoint two less tangible factors: the belief in what a company does, and the responsibility engendered by that belief.

Thomas in Herdorf has just such faith in the future of the automobile. At first glance, this may not seem like much of a statement - after all, who can really imagine a future without the car? "We believe the car of the future will become increasingly efficient, and that the fun factor will also rise steadily," says Managing Director Dietrich Thomas. "At the same time, though, we think that this will come about through the upgrading of existing standards rather than any radical new developments. After all, you can't keep on reinventing the wheel."

Thomas Magnete has been developing electromagnetic actuators since 1962, with the automobile sector providing the focus of this activity for the past two decades or so. In its function as a supplier - having firmly established itself within the market - Thomas now serves all the major manufacturers of premium-class cars in Germany. Thomas has also secured a market-leading position in the field of metering pumps for auxiliary heaters and for exhaust gas aftertreatment required in connection with the regeneration of diesel particulate filters (DPF).

Good products based on responsibility and passion

Thomas believes there is further potential in the areas of exhaust gas aftertreatment and fuel consumption. "This is where our sense of responsibility makes a difference. We don't just set out to find areas where we as a company can apply expertise to



Proportional solenoid for camshaft phasing

the market profitably," explains Markus Krauss, another of the firm's Managing Directors. "There are more and more cars in the world, and of course that's good news for the sector. Because of this, however, we are also faced with the urgent need to enhance the environmental compatibility of the automobile - and our products deliver a contribution towards that end." Thomas brings a great deal of passion, as well as the necessary know-how, to the task - an essential prerequisite for successful innovation. After all, if your heart is not in what you are doing, you will not do it very well and you are unlikely to be particularly successful.

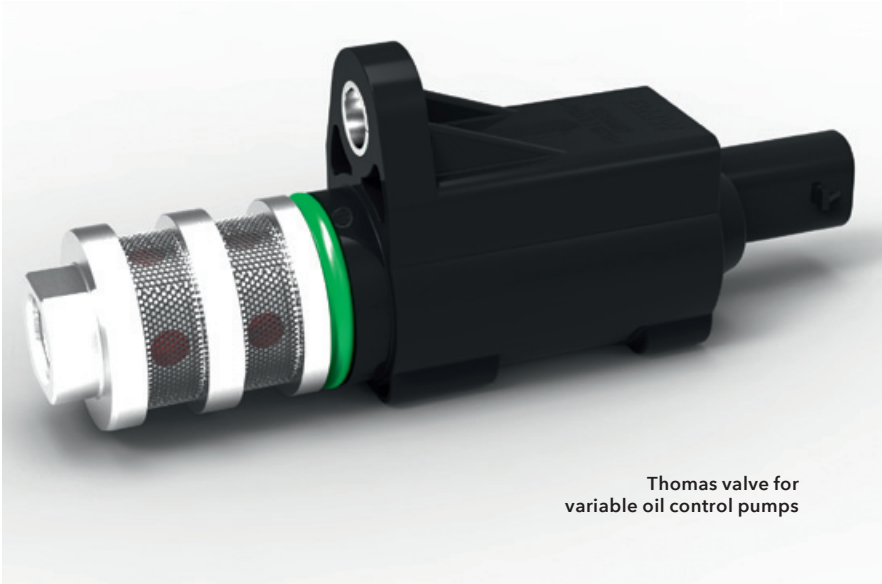
For more than a decade, Thomas has been developing proportional solenoids for camshaft phasers used in petrol engines and, increasingly, diesel engines too. These actually reduce consumption by facilitating the more effective utilisation of fuel. Thomas valves for variable oil pumps, which regulate the oil pump pressure in gearboxes, make up another successful series of products. These supply just the right amount of oil to an engine, which also serves to save fuel. Pilot valves for dual clutch transmissions, which control pressure and flow, also cut fuel consumption. This is another area in which Thomas is a leading developer.

The challenge: achieving the right balance for the market

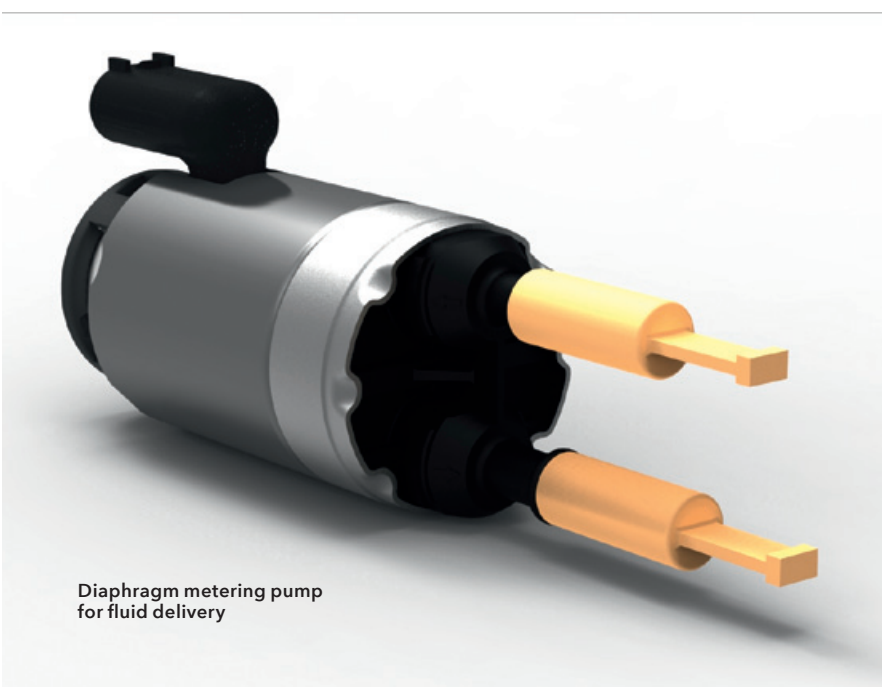
Thomas contends with the dilemma familiar to all players in the sector: projects and developments normally take three to five years, an eternity in this fast-moving age of social media. As soon as a project enters the series production phase, developers at Thomas and its customer companies are already working on optimisations: after all, the future is now, and it's unforgiving to those who take their time.

"On the one hand, a company needs staying power and a measure of patience to proceed from a new idea to the project stage and ultimately to series production," explains Dietrich Thomas. "On the other, we have to respond to the market with speed and flexibility, ideally driving the market with our own developments. For this reason we have to have many irons in the fire while keeping a close eye on the bigger picture," believes Dietrich Thomas.

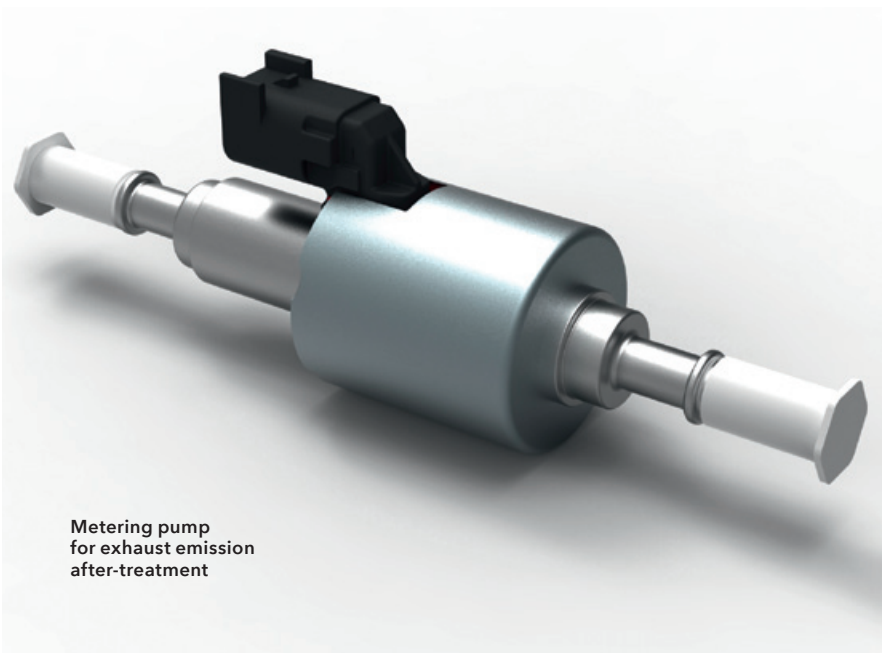
The challenge, then, is to find and maintain a balance between fast responses and methodical planning. Whatever skills a company may possess, this is the main precondition for success in the long term. ■



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