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# From a Family-Owned Business to an International Supplier of Pre-Treatment Products: Cooperation and Partnerships as Corporate Pillars

Interview with Nils Monreal and Stephan Zegers

Alufinish GmbH & Co. KG – Andernach (Germany)

Cooperation, global partnerships, and flexibility: these are the key elements that allowed the German developer of surface treatment products Alufinish to succeed in its field. During the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its foundation, we interviewed the managing directors Nils Monreal and Stephan Zegers to better understand the growth strategy of the company.

Anniversaries are a joyful time and are also a good moment to reflect on both the past and the future. This is especially true for the foundation anniversary of companies, that can transform the celebration into an opportunity to provide an overview on the past accomplishments as well as to plan for the future. Alufinish GmbH, a developer and manufacturer of chemical pre-treatment products and processes for aluminium, steel and zinc surfaces based in Andernach (Germany), is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup>

anniversary. In the last issue of this magazine, we dedicated an article to the company's history.

So, this time we have visited their site to interview Nils Monreal – the son-in-law of one of the original founders – and Stephan Zegers, the managing directors of Alufinish GmbH & Co. KG. They provided interesting insights into the strategies that ensured the success of Alufinish, the current developments of the surface treatment industry and the future trends that the company foresees.



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Your Leaders in  
Zero Liquid Discharge**How do you feel when thinking about the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Alufinish? Do you consider it a very important landmark?**

"It makes you feel old," jokes Stephan Zegers, the first who started to answer to our questions. "But seriously, I think it's a great achievement for a privately-owned company, which is quite rare these days. The founder Otmar Monreal understood that the pre-treatment of metal surfaces needed quality products and processes, because this sector offers a lot of opportunities for several industries. So, fifty years ago he entered this niche market and tried to provide the best solutions available at that time. The celebration of this anniversary means that his actions and vision have been successful. I am very proud of that."

**What do you consider to be the company's greatest successes over the past 50 years?**

"Our company has established its success on several small activities that ensured its growth over the course of fifty years. We started as a small family-owned business that manufactured standardised products through standardised processes and, over time, we innovated and grew bigger and bigger until we reached the global diffusion and the production capacities of today," continued Zegers.

"There is not a single key success, although we are very proud of our achievements such as the improvements in the quality of the products, their carbon footprint, and our efficient and environmentally friendly production processes. Our greatest success is then a combination of all the activities that allowed us to become what we are today," added Nils Monreal.

**Both the world and the industry of surface treatments have changed a lot since the foundation of Alufinish. How have your services changed over the past fifty years?**

"They have not, that is another important aspect. Let me explain better: we have been able to anticipate the evolution of the market, we innovated and modified our production processes, we improved our internal organisation and adapted the business to the new emerging customers' needs and requests,

but the core of our services has remained the same," clarified Zegers.

"The expectations of our customers have become increasingly higher, so we acted accordingly. When we started the operations, we delivered the products by bike", remembers Monreal. "Nowadays we have a global network of suppliers and we ship all over the world, so we now obviously rely on more sophisticated logistics processes. But our corporate mission and, therefore, our services are the same: to provide the best and high-performing solutions for the quality pre-treatment of metal surfaces."

**However, we guess both you and the industry as well have faced several obstacles and challenges. How has Alufinish overcome them?**

**Zegers:** "There have been undoubtedly some difficulties, such as the 2008 global economic crisis or the recent increase in the price of raw materials and their shortages, but our two corporate pillars have allowed us to overcome them. First, we decided to differentiate our production and offer solutions for several sectors. When the automotive market dropped down, we focused more on architecture-related services, as we were also specialised in processes for aluminium facades with ENVIROX NR. Second, we have also valued the human capital as the most important resource of our company. The greatest challenge we have ever faced is to create a successful team and retain it. Thus, we have been able to optimise our pipeline. The communication and the data flow between the teams is excellent and the production stages are perfectly interconnected, so every aspect of them is carefully planned and executed: from the development and design phase to the production, from the quality control to the post-sales assistance. This does not only include our personnel at the Andernach site, but also our suppliers as well."

**Monreal:** "Or we should say, partners. Answering to the new requests of the clients quickly and efficiently is very difficult, so we rely on a global network of partners that distribute our products but also help us to stay in contact with the customers, to listen to them and act promptly as soon as they need our help. Just supplying products is not enough

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**Stephan Zegers (left) and Nils Monreal.**

to succeed in the market, you should also interact with the customers, understand their processes and develop together the most suitable solutions.”

“Let me add something here. Mr. Monreal rightfully said that we really value the efforts of our team. As a matter of fact, we also focus on improving the know-how of everyone involved. When, for instance, a technician is planning to retire, we will have them flank a younger operator not just for a couple of months, but for years. We want to provide a natural overflow of competences. In this way, also the customers find themselves comfortable with the new staff of Alufinish. The same happens with our partners. We have been working together for several years, we share valuable information and knowledge and we keep updating each other. Different countries have different laws, regulations, materials, climate, temperature and water quality. Obviously, a single product developer cannot know them all, so cooperation is extremely important,” explained Zegers.

**We talked about the past, now let's focus on the future: how do you think the aluminium surface treatment sector will change in the next 5 to 10 years?**

**Monreal:** “This is a very interesting question. I think that the aluminium sector will expand

its market in new areas of the world, as aluminium can be a very useful material for several sustainable applications. For a company operating in the pre-treatment industry, the key for a successful industrial expansion will be to identify what will be included in the surface treatment sectors in the next years: there might be new bio-based raw materials, new packaging solutions, new process technologies. It will be important to stay up-to-date with the evolutions. In addition, also energy efficiency and the recycling rate (second and even third usage of materials) will likely play a very important role.”

**Zegers:** The sector needs also to find efficient ways to handle procurement and shipping, in order to have positive effects on the entire carbon footprint. To do so, it is important to develop successful business relationships with suppliers and all the other partners. Creating a trustworthy network can help to better manage all the aspect of the business operations. From the procurement of raw materials to the shipment of the products and the post-sales assistance”.

**That is why Alufinish motto is “Build on Trust”, isn't it?**

Zegers: “That is correct. If we build the future together, we can successfully face all its challenges. We really value the trust given

by our partners, they believe in our activities and products as the best solutions to treat surfaces and excel. We listen to both our partners and final clients, so we are able to improve the processes involved and save costs for everyone. The core value we stand for is that we are more than just a supplier, we are the partner you can trustfully rely on: service-orientated, flexible and adaptable. It is a big responsibility, so cooperation is the key.”

**Finally, can you introduce our readers to the latest developments of Alufinish?**

**Monreal:** “We are focused on environmentally friendly chrome-free and boron-free products based on titanium and zirconium, suitable not only for aluminium but also for steel and hot dip-galvanised surfaces, as well as on new and optimised handling and cleaning properties. We are also working to help our clients on the anodising site to improve their etching processes with our additives that ensure better drainage and low foaming, and we increased our efforts on sealing products that are more environmentally friendly: nickel-, cobalt- and heavy metal-free systems. Since 2018, we started a partnership with a supplier for a full range of organic dyes, from those dyes many are also heavy metal free.”