

# People come first: The Recyca way

**Recyca is an empties broker based in Belgium that was established in 2001. I met with Mike Van der Weyde, the company's General Manager, who together with a friend, built the business up from its humble beginnings in a garden shed and his new recruit, Dutchman Dimitry van Raamsdonk (Sales and Purchase Manager) who has been in the remanufacturing industry for 16 years. Together they showed me around the enterprise and filled me in on everything I could possibly want to know about Recyca.**

## On dogs and small beginnings...

One of the best things about writing for *The Recycler* is that you get to meet people and hear stories of how they came to be in the industry. And they don't come more obscure than this one. Van der Weyde explained how his father breeds dogs and has a friend in Italy who breeds the same type of dog. He also had a cartridge collecting business in Italy and when he came to visit he suggested that they start collecting cartridges in Belgium and sold their empties to him.

His curiosity piqued, Van der Weyde got on the internet and realised that there were a lot of people doing this in Holland but not really in Belgium and that there was a gap in the market that he might be able to slip into. He drove to a large cartridge collection centre in the Netherlands to investigate further. Convinced that the idea had a lot of potential he set about starting his own business.

What impressed me most about the whole Recyca outfit was Van der Weyde's dedication and willingness to put in 120% to get the operation off the ground. He started small and slowly but steadily built the company up. For the first six months he worked full time in his regular job and ran the Recyca business on top of that, using his garden shed as a base and putting in 14 – 15 hour a days. He started initially with a partner – Michel – who moved on when his wife had a baby and he felt that he couldn't dedicate enough time to the business.

Van der Weyde showed me a series of pictures that told the Recyca story. The first picture he showed me depicted him holding the first cartridge he ever collected. The pictures then took us on a journey with Recyca, documenting its progress from shed to warehouse and then to a larger

warehouse still. Many of the pictures were taken at night – showing how in the early days they really did work well into the night for Recyca, using every spare moment.

The company's first warehouse was 200m<sup>2</sup>. They moved to their current 600m<sup>2</sup> warehouse in September 2004 but it's already bursting at the seams and Recyca hires extra storage space around the corner in which to put all the incoming cartridges before they are sorted.



Van der Weyde points out that the company started up at a time when the price of empties was declining. That it was successful at a time when there was a downturn in the market bodes well for the company. The business has grown steadily and last year it registered €1m turnover for the first time. He is pleased with the way the company has grown slowly and steadily and

enjoys being his own boss. Moreover, he says that the experience of building up a business from scratch has been like raising a baby for five years and watching its progress – it has been extremely satisfying.

## Collection programme

When the company first started Van der Weyde went collecting cartridges himself. He says that this was a really interesting experience as he got to go to interesting places such as behind the scenes at airports. Later the company bought one van which would collect cartridges in the East of the country on Monday, the South on Tuesday etc. This was feasible as the country is small. However, having one person and one van posed problems – for example if the van was broken or the driver sick or on leave, nothing got collected.

The company therefore found a partner who will collect boxes when they are full and deliver empty boxes ready to be refilled. Recyca still has a van but this tends to be used only to cover on customers that ▶

## WHAT MAKES THIS INDUSTRY SO GREAT?

I was interested to hear Recyca's take on what makes the industry that they work for so great. They cited the following points –

- ★ People from outside of the industry never cease to be amazed that such an industry exists.
- ★ Everybody – from schools and organisations to big multinationals – can be your customer.
- ★ The industry moves very quickly.
- ★ There are so many things to do!
- ★ Contact with people.
- ★ Wheeling and dealing.
- ★ Never a dull moment.
- ★ Every day is different.
- ★ This is an unusual industry inasmuch as it has grown out of a piece of trash and now provides people with a job.

People come first: The Recyca way *continued*

require extra treatment – for example defence customers who have secure sites and require a known driver for security reasons. The cost price of the new partner is roughly the same as the wage for one person and so the arrangement works very well for them.

Recyca has built up a strong collection scheme in the Flemish part of Belgium. Companies, schools and organisations can collect cartridges and elect that the money from them goes to a particular school or organisations. Recyca has come up with posters and brochures to support this scheme.

The company is just starting to delve into the collection of phones and it has a partner that collects computer waste and thus it offers their customers a solution for other kinds of waste too.

**Stock**

When a Recyca customer asks for their box of cartridges to be collected, Recyca promises to collect it within three days.

The cartridges are then brought to the warehouse, which is exceptionally well-organised – it has to be – its relatively small size dictates that they have to be very organised to ensure that all the space is used efficiently. Warehouse space is an issue because there is such a proliferation of models being released by the OEMs. When they collect them they also separate out virgins and non virgins – so they need a different space for each. The shelves in the warehouse are exactly the size of the boxes they use for packing so that cartridges can be stacked in each and when the shelf is full everything can just be removed into a box.

All stock is logged manually and scanned with a handheld scanner that feeds into the computerised stock system. It all seems to run like clockwork.

One of the most difficult challenges is to keep stock turning over – to anticipate what remanufacturers are going to need – something that Recyca has started to master over the years. There are constantly about 50,000 units in stock (virgins) – this represents about one month's worth of collection. These need to be shifted as quickly as possible as otherwise money is tied up in stock that is hanging around in the warehouse. More obscure cartridges are turned around quite quickly because they are quite scarce.

At the back of the warehouse are three piles – one of cartridges that need to be disposed of, one of cartridges that can be used if repaired and one of cartridges from which parts can be removed and

**RECYCA'S UNIQUE SELLING POINTS**

I asked Van der Weyde what the major selling points of his company are and he jokes that Dimitry is a major USP for them – he has been in the industry for 16 years and what he doesn't know about the industry could be written on the back of a postage stamp. Other selling points they mention are:

- ★ They will try to ascertain exactly what the remanufacturer wants from their cartridges and make sure they provide exactly that.
- ★ Speed – nine out of ten orders go out within 24 hours. Thanks to the efforts of Billy Geuens in the warehouse, if a customer places an order at 5pm on a Friday it will go out first thing on the Monday.
- ★ Staff take responsibility for orders and handle things personally – an order won't go through many peoples' hands. Everyone feels confident enough to make judgement calls on orders – they do not have to go

through a lot of complicated channels to get orders approved.

- ★ Communication within the company and with all clients is good. Clients who have bought a consignment of cartridges will be kept updated at all times as to the progress of their order.
- ★ Stock control is done in real time – with records updated twice a day. The stock changes drastically all the time and so this is crucial
- ★ They have thought long and hard about their packaging, choosing to package cartridges into small boxes so that they can cater for remanufacturers who want just smaller consignments of cartridges. An added benefit of this is that the smaller boxes mean the cartridges are more protected – thus ensuring better quality.

And as if this wasn't enough, the guys joke that another major selling point is that they are all "unbelievably cute"!

used to make repairs. The company granulates what waste it can and is able to sell it profitably for recycling. Just 350kg of material goes to landfill each month.

Van der Weyde wipes the floor with his hand and shows me his outstretched palm – it is surprisingly clean. The warehouse is cleaned down every Friday with a special

vacuum. This is done to ensure that the risk to the health of the people working with the cartridges is minimal.

Billy Geuens, chief of the warehouse, was the first person that Van der Weyde hired (by a strange twist of fate he was hired from the recruitment agency that he himself worked for full time in the days when Recyca



was in its infancy). Geuens is now in charge of a team of five people and he and Van der Weyde have become firm friends.

In fact this friendly atmosphere extends to all the staff. I'm told that everyone gets on very well and regards each other as an equal. They form a tight working group and hold social events such as a small party for each other on their birthday. Van der Weyde believes it is a fun atmosphere to work in and is really pleased with the way that everyone is prepared to pull together for the good of the company and its customers. For example on the day I visited it was the height of winter and a lot of illness was doing the rounds and one of the people who works in the office had offered to bring in his old clothes and work in the warehouse.

### Quality of empties

There is always debate within the cartridge industry about the quality of finished remanufactured cartridges. However, Van der Weyde believes we should take a step back from this and look also at the raw materials that go into the remanufacturing process – the cartridges themselves. He is interested in opening a debate on what constitutes a good empty – what kinds of things remanufacturers are looking for

when they source their empties.

He points out that in the car industry, suppliers are tested for quality, but in this industry this is not done. Recyca are often complimented on the quality of their empties, which they clean and test before selling. The whole company values client feedback, feeling that if the empties he provides are not perfect he would like to get the opportunity to put that right the next time he supplies that client with empties.

### Belgium

Recyca explain a bit about the vagaries of doing business in Belgium. They tell me that a lot of Belgian people turn their nose up at remanufactured cartridges, saying things like "I tried this about 17 years ago and it was no good so I won't try it again". Only about 10 -15% of the cartridges they collect are non-virgins, which would suggest that people don't use remanufactured cartridges in great quantities here.


In spite of the fact that it is such a small country legislation such as the WEEE Directive slow to come into effect in Belgium as they have three administrative parts to the country – Flemish, Brussels and French – getting legislation through all three is tricky.

They tell me that the expansion of Europe

hasn't really affected them as a company. A lot of East European companies can source empties much more cheaply closer to home and also the further they are sending cartridges the more this costs

### Competition – the Belgian way

The Recyca guys explain that the Belgian collecting industry is not very competitive and there is a real element of cooperation between the companies here – which may sound alien to companies operating in different countries. Van der Weyde told me that if a company were to call him and complain about one of his competitors' products he would most likely call that competitor and warn them. And what is more, his competitors would be likely to do the same for him. Strange yes, but he points out that even though you may not win that customer from your competitor, you are unlikely to lose many customers if all companies are looking out for each other in this way. "Let the sun shine for everyone" says van Raamsdonk.

Continuing this philosophy to its logical conclusion Recyca has also joined ETIRA. To date it is one of the few cartridge collection companies that is a member of ETIRA – and the only Belgian representative. Van der Weyde says that to be competitors and 



still work together is a strange philosophy for some people, but he is positive about his experiences with ETIRA, explaining how at the most recent meeting in Frankfurt some really animated discussions got going and people were becoming more involved, more confident and more trusting of one another.

### ISO

One big decision that Van der Weyde has had to make about the future of his company recently is the decision to strive for ISO certification. Initially he wondered whether this was the right step for a company that was still small and in its infancy – however he decided that it made

sense to implement a good set of standards that Recyca could expand with. After all, it is much easier to implement good, logical standards at a small company and grow with these than it is to untangle the systems of a larger company that has grown up with only a passing thought to logical processes.

Recyca has an ISO consultant that comes every Monday. Having spoken to a number of ISO consultants they settled for working with someone who said

he only wanted to work with companies that were genuinely trying to improve their processes rather than simply hankering after a bit of paper that would make them look good. This philosophy seemed exactly in tune with their own.

The ISO consultant writes down the procedures that the company currently has but also suggests better ways of doing things – questioning the way things are done and acting as a sounding board. Recyca tell me that the whole ISO process has brought about a certain amount of consultation within the company and everyone feels as though they have a voice. It has been a very positive experience for them.

### Challenges and ambitions

As well as day-to-day challenges such as stock management, logistics and storage, a major challenge facing companies like Recyca is an emerging trend for remanufacturers to collect their own cartridges and source only the more obscure cartridges from brokers. Even so, such companies are at present buying in about 25 – 40% of their empties. Complying with all European legislation, storage and freight costs are also a big challenge.

In terms of hopes for the future Recyca would like to be involved in defining what makes a good empty. Van der Weyde is also keen on becoming one of the big five collectors in Europe – not only in terms of quality but also in terms of service. This market is quite volatile so Van der Weyde is looking into possibilities for diversifying to make sure that all his eggs are not stacked in one basket – looking at possibilities such as collecting other waste and selling imaging supplies. The Chinese market is also very interesting for brokers at present simply because of the large quantities of empties that are being demanded by companies in China. This is another future direction to explore. 