

An article I wrote for a BMW Manufacturing Co. newsletter.

## **Draexlmaier Automotive of America achieves environmental success and gains recognition**

by Hans VanderKnyff

For Draexlmaier Automotive of America, a BMW supplier, two recent events capped several years of hard work. In January, the Duncan, South Carolina, facility received recognition as the winner of the Best Industry Recycling Program Award; the following month, it received its official certification as an ISO 14001 company, a significant environmental achievement. But these events are not the chance results of isolated activities; on the contrary, these activities were part of an overall environmental vision.

Headquartered in Vilsbiburg, Germany, Draexlmaier's local plant supplies BMW with a variety of parts for both the Z3 and the X5. It began operations in the Upstate in 1994, primarily to support the newly built BMW plant. "From a sales volume standpoint," said Draexlmaier Plant Manager Chip Vogel, "our support of BMW is somewhere in the 90 to 95 percent range." The plant's operations cover three main areas: the making of plastic parts, the cutting and laminating of leather products, and the distribution of electrical harnesses.

The plant's injection-molding facility produces plastic parts that protect a car's wiring and electrical gear. It also manufactures various interior-trim plastics.

Draexlmaier handles leather cutting and laminating for such items as the boots for the gearshift and handbrake levers. For the Z3 model, the plant also produces all the leather interior parts, such as the trim for the doors and the center console.

A Draexlmaier plant in Reynosa, Mexico, manufactures the electrical harnesses used in the vehicles. That facility ships the assemblies to the Duncan plant, which warehouses and supplies them to BMW.

As with any manufacturing operation, the activities at the Duncan facility offered opportunities for environmental improvement, and Draexlmaier took the lead by seeking ISO 14001 certification.

"ISO 14001" refers to one of a series of international standards and guidelines and takes into account the environmental side of doing business. In other words, it deals with managing the possible environmental effects of a company's products, services, or activities. Perhaps most important, ISO 14001 expects continuous improvement in environmental performance; complacency won't get a company very far.

Pursuing ISO 14001 certification is not required by law, but customer or industry expectations may encourage a company to do so. According to Chip, Draexlmaier's corporate policy strongly supports environmental excellence, and that underlying principle was one factor in the decision

to seek certification. “We wanted to be proactive and move forward,” he said, “because we felt it was the right thing for us to do.”

The certification process can be difficult and time-consuming, but, with dedicated help from Draexlmaier’s corporate office and from Dr. Phil Barnes of the University of South Carolina’s School of the Environment—who served as the lead consultant—the hard work paid off: the facility received word last November that it was being recommended for certification; formal certification was issued on February 7 of this year. ISO 14001, says Chip, “puts discipline into the system,” and the company has made great strides in its environmental management.

Part of this same pursuit of environmental excellence is the company’s recycling program. It began simply enough with the collection and recycling of aluminum cans and plastic bottles, but the company knew it could do much more. With the help of Waste Management of South Carolina, the facility performed a six-month waste audit, determining what could be recycled and what couldn’t. The results are truly impressive: not long ago, Draexlmaier landfilled most of its solid waste and recycled very little; today, the company landfills only about 25–30 percent of its solid waste and recycles everything else.

For its efforts, Draexlmaier’s Duncan facility received the Best Industry Recycling Program Award for 2001 from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control and from the Recycling Market Development Advisory Council. The recognition is well-deserved.