

Cosmo Group takes superstore concept online

For 27 years the Cosmo Group has been on a quest to transform South Africa's welding market. *African Fusion* catches up with Group director, Pierre van Nieuwenhuizen; general manager, Petrus Pretorius; newly appointed sales manager, Jaques Botha; and training manager, Emma Britz, about adding eCommerce with online support services and training to its offering, while reinforcing its total solutions offering for welders and fabrication companies of any size.

Founded in April 1994 as a small business selling welding consumables, by 2009 Cosmo Industrial was opening South Africa's first one-stop welding and industrial superstore. In the last decade, several distribution businesses have been added: Cosmo Manufacturing Supplies; Cosmo Construction Suppliers; Cosmo Railways Supplies; Cosmo Mining Supplies; Cosmo Automation Solutions; and Cosmo Training Academy, which are all Level 2 B-BBEE companies that now operate under the Cosmo Group umbrella.

Even in the midst of the current COVID Pandemic, Cosmo's growth trajectory is set to continue with the launch of an eCommerce platform customised to suit the needs of the welding fraternity. "Welding is a very technical process, so it isn't easy for clients to make online equipment purchases. While it's easy for a customer to log into an online eCommerce portal and buy a familiar product, such as a welding helmet or a pair of gloves, but it is never going to be easy to buy a R500 000 to R600 000 welding machine online. Any customer will need to be reassured by a technical expert that what they are buying



The Cosmo Group's senior management team: Jaques Botha, sales manager; Petrus Pretorius, general manager; Rossouw van der Merwe, Group director; Emma Britz, training manager; and Pierre van Nieuwenhuizen, Group director.

will do what they want it to," says Van Nieuwenhuizen.

"Online customers are often not technical people. Our research suggests they are much more cautious about buying technical products online and returns can be as high as 30% on the types of products we sell. For us to be successful online, we believe we need to create the same type of interactive experience customers get when visiting our superstore in person, where specialists are on hand to answer questions, make suggestions and steer customers towards solutions that are best suited to their welding needs," he adds.

"Is it the chosen process best for the applications; is the consumable suitable; is there a better combination? Many details need to be considered before one can confidently decide on a solution for a welding application," he notes.

In designing an eCommerce platform for the Cosmo Group, a key future goal is to offer customers a positive and interactive online experience, where customers will have direct and immediate access to technical sales representatives. "Purchasing equipment involves investment, with customers expecting to enjoy the buying

experience while being assured of value for money in the long term. For this to happen, they need to be able to talk to one of our people," he suggests.

In a further effort to validate the choice of online equipment transaction, welding customers often prefer to see a welding demonstration, to see for themselves that the proposed solution is fit-for-purpose. Petrus Pretorius explains: "We regularly do welding demonstrations for clients, in their workshops or at our technology centre, for example. We find out as much as possible about the client's application, then we set up a machine to weld a test piece that closely represents the job. Sometimes we go one step further by doing a qualification test, which would require the weld sample to be sectioned and tested," he says.

"So we are also looking at ways of converting the customer demonstration experience into an online service, where we still set up the welding trial in exactly the same way, but instead of us going to the client or them coming to us, we stream a video of the weld-demo live online. This can be broadcast to the client and his or her welding team to witness, from wherever they may be," suggests Pretorius.

"We have already done a pipe welding demonstration for one of our customers from the Lincoln Electric WeldTech



As well stocking Lincoln Electric welding machines and consumables at its Superstore in Silverton, Pretoria, Cosmo Group is developing an online interactive experience that will enable customers to confidently buy welding equipment online.

Centre in Dubai. Customers logged in to watch the demonstration, during which they could ask questions and make suggestions regarding different things to try, just like a real demonstration. Photos were also taken for sending to customers as a permanent record and to circulate and share. This opens up a whole new way of doing demonstrations," continues Botha. "It applies to power tools, hand tools, compressors and to all of our specialist equipment range," he says, adding that it is all about taking away the uncertainty from a purchasing decision.

"I see this online service as an ideal way of reaching into sub-Saharan Africa. We have an economically viable and attractive welding range that is ideally suited to markets north of our borders. The current industrial supply chain is still run through South Africa, but imports from Asia are becoming stronger and stronger. We need to respond," adds Botha.

"Through this new interactive online eCommerce service, we can offer excellent supply and support services out of South Africa, offering expertise to help people in remote areas to choose the right equipment and then to get the most out of that equipment. We will strive to build trust-based relationships, where clients know that even though we cannot visit each other in person, they have online access to specialists to help them resolve their welding issues," Van Nieuwenhuizen tells *African Fusion*.

Through its Training Academy, the Cosmo Group is also in the process of launching several online courses. According to Cosmo's head of training, Emma Britz, the first of these is customer

service. "Customer service training is a vital part of any business and, ultimately, it can mean the difference between success or failure. Frustrated or unhappy consumers can have a negative impact on every aspect of business operations.

"Regardless of the nature of the company's business, it is so important to adopt the right strategies to improve customer service and our Customer Service Training Course provides the skills to develop customer satisfaction before, during and after a customer's requirements are met," she explains.

Also being developed are Conducting Meetings and Conflict Management courses: "Conducting a meeting training will deal with how to plan and lead successful meetings. Delegates will learn how to draw up an agenda and then facilitate a meeting following the activities listed in the agenda. Other essential skills include leadership, decision making and creative thinking, which all help establish a neutral atmosphere amongst participants in meetings, as well as how to deal with misunderstandings, while Conflict management training will introduce some practical conflict resolution techniques and strategies that managers and team leaders can effectively use to resolve conflict in the workplace," she adds.

Van Nieuwenhuizen continues: "We should also note that we are now qualifying our Academy's first International Welders. So far, we have qualified two IIW International Welders and another three have completed the theoretical examinations and will start with their practical experience soon," he says.

Going back to online services, Pretorius notes that Cosmo intends to start



A wide range of safety equipment – from head to foot protection – as well as a variety of specialised welding and other safety equipment is on offer from Cosmo Group's Dromex and Jonsson Workwear brands.

delivering a series of online seminars focusing on pipe welding, different cutting processes and hardfacing, for example.

"Although we offer a host of some of the best welding brands available, Cosmo has evolved into a brand in its own right," believes Jaques Botha. "We can offer holistic solutions that combine the best available products and brands to get the most cost-effective welding results within the quality, skills and cost constraints of any project," he says, adding that Cosmo specialists are supported by people from the best OEMs in the world should they encounter issues they have never experienced before.

"The Cosmo Group is there for customers and in a position to service customers in a multitude of ways, which, from now on, will also include modern online services specially tailored to the needs of the welding industry.

"We have also adopted a new CRM software system, which enables us to look after customers better, making business-to-business transactions much easier. Cosmo sales personnel can identify opportunities by grouping customers in similar sectors that generally procure similar products. Our new CRM system can then identify what their needs might be and which Cosmo products will best meet those needs," Botha informs *African Fusion*.

"In all that we do, from a customer and a supplier perspective, we strive to generate trust. We believe this is why we have been able to sustain our growth, despite global recessions, political turmoil, COVID and many other negative economic drivers that have afflicted us over the years," Van Nieuwenhuizen concludes. ■



Cosmo Academy welding students doing initial welding skills training using Lincoln Electric's Virtual welding system.