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COVER STORY

Capital Complexities

Why operating in the South East is no easy matter for firms like Hallett Silbermann
HEAVY IS JUST THE START...

WIND TURBINES, GENERATOR HOUSINGS, HEAVY EQUIPMENT OR COMPLETE PRODUCTION UNITS... DUTCH FIRM VAN DER VLIST TRANSPORT GROUP CAN DELIVER CARGO ALL OVER THE WORLD, REGARDLESS OF ITS SIZE OR WEIGHT. BUT THERE'S MUCH MORE TO THE FIRM THAN JUST HEAVY HAULAGE, AS ELLEN HAMELINK FINDS OUT.

Van der Vlist Transport Group’s bright orange trucks definitely stand out on the road. It’s best known for special transport but the firm does much more than just haulage, says Van der Vlist Logistics MD, Martin van Dam.

“Our wheels are the cornerstone of our business but haulage is only part of the job,” he confirms. “Nowadays, we handle a lot of other activities too – things we basically evolved into over the years.”

When it first started in 1930, Van der Vlist was a transport firm, plain and simple. The family-run business primarily focused on moving construction materials and equipment, helping to service the construction equipment boom during those years. Naturally, it needed lowloaders for these heavy loads. By the early 1970s, the company had started operating beyond its national borders and in the 1990s, it had widened its field of operation still further, transporting construction equipment produced in the Far East.

“These were standard machines but still needed quite a few modifications before they could be used by European clients,” says van Dam. “This was the first step in our transformation from transport firm to logistics service provider. And now, our headquarters at Groot-Ammers and our facilities in Moerdijk and Zeebrugge (Belgium) are completely geared towards technical services.

Another example of how the company expanded its services is its terminal at Moerdijk.
The company’s philosophy is all about reliability, he continues. “There are two things that are particularly important to us at Van der Vlist: providing good, reliable service to our clients and ensuring a stable work environment for our people,” he says. “The work we do comes with major responsibilities. We have a fleet of 250 trucks and semi-trailers which are out on the road day and night. Our drivers need to continuously think on behalf of their fellow road users, since other drivers usually don’t see the risks involved around heavy transport. That’s why, generally speaking, our drivers are at least 28 years old and have at least five years’ experience.

“Before they start working for us, our drivers have to complete an internal training programme,” he continues. “This focuses on loading and offloading cargo, among other things. After that, they drive under the supervision of a mentor for a while, which allows us to determine whether a new driver really fits into our team and shares our philosophy. After all, this type of transport isn’t just about driving from A to B – it involves things like settling the waybill and customs documents and securing the load. In most cases, we’re transporting new equipment, too, so damaging a load is not an option. We expect a lot from our drivers – you could call them our ambassadors.”

The team at Van der Vlist certainly has a strong sense of responsibility, he says. “This doesn’t just apply to our road haulage operation but to all our lines of business. Whether it’s the operations at the terminal, storage, stock management, dealing with customs documents or delivering an international door-to-door service via rail or air, we always try to do the best for our clients. Our clients have confidence in us – and we want to keep it that way.”

Part of its process for ensuring it does so is to regularly visit its clients’ sites, he explains. “We believe it is important to know the people you’re dealing with,” he explains.
“We enjoy thinking alongside the client and we never just quote a price – instead, we like to advise clients which routes, which modes of transport and which procedures will best suit their purposes. That’s what our company slogan – ‘The Power to care’ – is really all about. It’s an integral part of our company culture.”

“And in many cases, this also results in good rates,” says Martin van Dam. “But often, we are not our clients’ sole focus,” he says. “When a customer asks ‘could you help us?’ – as many do – those tend to be the really interesting jobs.”

“We provide standard services, of course, but we take on complicated assignments like ducks to water. Solving problems gives us a lot of energy. And when we come up against challenges during a project, we don’t give up. We take it up a notch, as a team. The challenging projects are an area where we can really make the biggest difference.”

It may sound like this firm will take on anything, but actually, it’s very aware of its limits, says van Dam. “We don’t have our own ships, we won’t be buying any planes anytime soon and we stay away from hazardous goods,” he says. “When we do a job, we do it well and we want to be able to provide our clients with solid advice. If we can’t do that, we refer them to someone that can.”

Despite that, he claims, no other firm in Europe offers the same range of services as Van der Vlist. They include special and heavy haulage, project management, port and terminal operations, storage, logistics and technical services. “You’ll find one other company in North America that handles more or less the same activities, but it doesn’t have its own terminal and focuses on a different region – actually, they’ve become a good partner of ours,” says van Dam.
Partnering with other firms in this way means Van der Vlist can arrange transport to and from areas where it doesn’t operate its own transport fleet, as well as making use of other models of transport, which, in a smaller way, it says Van Dam expects these partners to deliver the same level of quality the company itself does.

“We ask a lot from our own 500-strong team and the same applies to our flexible layer of regular contractors in the Netherlands and elsewhere,” he says. “We often call them to discuss matters like their procedures and training programmes.”

That’s absolutely vital, he explains, given the complicated backdrop of all the work and the widely varying rules and regulations in different countries when it comes to heavy haulage.

Van der Vlist got exactly sitting on its hands back at base, either. “We’re currently rolling out an IT platform to improve efficiency,” says Van Dam. “And we’re involved in the ongoing development of lighter trailers that can be used for a greater variety of different purposes, too. The lighter the trailer, the more vehicles we have. We like to stay up to date because innovation never stands still.”

Despite the very wide scope of operations and all the evolution that has taken place in Van der Vlist’s 85 years of experience, heavy haulage remains at the heart of the company, says Van Dam.

Although sometimes with people were more aware of all the other stuff we do, our wheels are still our pride and joy,” he says. “And aren’t the only ones! These big, high-powered trucks have quite an effect on people and our activities tend to attract a lot of interest. We even have people contacting us to check when a specific truck of ours will be in their neighbourhood again, so they can take a picture of it!”

Looking at the firm’s distinctive orange workhorses, that really doesn’t surprise us at all.

BAUMA 2016 Machinery has to shine when your company is presenting itself at a trade fair, especially at a construction show like Bauma. This year’s show, held in Munich in April, saw leading international suppliers such as Volvo, Terex, Komatsu, Doosan, Kobelco, LiuGong and Sany relying on Van der Vlist, says Van Dam.

The job involved taking receipt of machinery as it arrived at its port of entry, inspecting it for damage and where necessary, sorting out any repairs while keeping it in short-term storage. After a final pre-delivery inspection, it had to be transported to Munich, where a dedicated team of Van der Vlist mechanics took over to unload, assemble and position the machines before testing, cleaning and polishing them. After the exhibition, Van der Vlist did the whole thing again in reverse.

Dublin Silos Another recent project called for the firm to move six silos to Dublin in a just-in-time delivery. Two of these, with a diameter of 6 metres, were brought to Dublin by barge from Germany.

The smaller silos were transported across Europe by Van der Vlist’s own fleet. All of them were transferred via the Van der Vlist quay, at the multipurpose terminal in the port of Moerdijk, into a chartered coastal vessel. Upon arrival in Dublin, they were then transferred to trucks for the final leg of their journey and delivered right on time.