

New Generation Joins Karl Senner Inc.

BY CAPT. RICHARD EBERHARDT

It's hard to read *The Waterways Journal* for a month without seeing yet another boat christened with Reintjes gearboxes. Considered by many to be the premier marine transmission, Reintjes is sold in the Americas exclusively by Karl Senner Inc. (KSI) of Kenner, La.

In its 40th year in operation, KSI has transitioned ownership for the second time in the history of the company, now leaving full control to Ralph Senner. The company was founded by Karl H. Senner in 1972 to exclusively sell and service Reintjes gearboxes to the North American market.

Today, the company has diversified its product portfolio to also include Steer-prop azimuth thrusters and Berg Propulsion controllable-pitch propellers and thruster units.

Karl H. Senner relinquished ownership a few years before his passing in 2007 to his two sons, Ralph and Mike. After 36 years in the business, Mike retired earlier this year.

Joining the business as the third generation are Ralph's two sons, Karl Ashby and Christopher. Both sons spent the better part of two years at the manufacturing plants in Europe learning company vendors, equipment, and the intricacies of the manufacturing processes.

Karl, a graduate from LSU with a background in KSI service, was recently appointed service manager, while Christopher, an SMU graduate from the Cox



Karl, Ralph and Christopher Senner.

—Photo by Capt. Richard Eberhardt

School of Business, will focus on sales and finance. Also new to the KSI team is Steve Valdes, previously from Interna-

tional Offshore, who will serve as chief financial officer.

KSI recently announced several oper-

ational improvements, including updated communication networks, plans for up-

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SEASON'S GREETINGS



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Senner

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grading the physical plant, and plans to establish a new training facility and training program for service technicians.

"We are all quite happy about the current state of the company and are optimistic for the future," Ralph Senner told *The Waterways Journal*.

KSI has also developed a new mission statement addressing the company and its customers:

Our mission is to provide the maritime community with the highest quality propulsion equipment in order to optimize vessel performance, safety, and operating hours. At Karl Senner Inc., we supply robust, industry-proven marine propulsion systems, all backed by an experienced factory-supported technical team, resulting in superior service. As a family owned and operated business, we aim to maximize customer satisfaction by professionally delivering prompt, effective solutions.

Today KSI has 47 employees and is looking to expand, particularly in the service and parts departments, with some additional growth in sales, Senner said, adding the company normally carries about \$16 million in parts inventory to avoid long lead times for customers in need of equipment.

"KSI is a service company," he emphasized. "We dedicate ourselves to maximizing customer satisfaction. In the long run, we know our customers want to capitalize on high operating hours and low operating costs. Our customers have

come to know and expect a conservative-sized drive system from the flywheel, back."

Focusing on service, Senner said, "The most influential long-term change will be the development of our new training program and facility for service technicians. We aim to steepen the learning curve and broaden the skillset in a smaller amount of time. The program will include comprehensive and practical courses specializing in all KSI products."

The courses will range from standard overhauls to complex troubleshooting of the entire driveline, he explained, adding "Our team will have the most in-depth understanding of the marine systems in the industry."

Senner recently hired Steve Fisk, who will work in training and safety, explaining that Fisk was brought in to formalize the expanding training and safety programs to comply with vetting requirements of large customers. Fisk developed policy and procedures for his previous employer, DuPont Chemical Company.

In addition to an exemplary parts and service philosophy, KSI also prides itself on the sales team's ability to integrate its systems and size them appropriately for any customized application, Senner said.

"My father was very conservative in sizing of equipment," Ralph explained, saying that it can cost a little more money to upsize a gearbox, but "the extra cost is never much compared to the increased reliability and exponential increase in longevity it will deliver to the customer."

Even with a large geographical territory and customer base, Senner sat in his paneled office and seemed laid back as he explained to *The Waterways Journal* how his company prefers to work with its customers.

"KSI likes to get involved on the initial design," he said. "We are dedicated to be on-site for installation, crank-up, and are on 24-hour standby service for life of the vessel. It's a little more time-consuming, but we build a rapport with the engineers, owners, and yards, and we seldom see gearboxes come back for repairs."

Z-Drive Project

Sitting on display in Senner's office is a model of a 130-foot triple-screw towboat with Z-drives. It is a project Ralph Senner worked on with Corning Townsend of CT Marine in an effort to promote the revolutionary Steerprop azimuthing drive systems to the North American market.

For an inland application, Senner said water depth is a major consideration. That is why he chose a triple-screw design, with smaller wheels than would be carried on a twin engine offshore design where skinny water is not an issue.

With azimuthing propellers that are enclosed in kort nozzles and rotate 360 degrees, there is no need for main and flanking rudders. The hull actually extends below the wheels. Without the rudders, the hull bottom is "cleaner" and there is a much better flow of water to the props.

Senner has done extensive research in South America, where Z-drive towboats have been operating for over a decade.

They have learned how to avoid all of the initial mistakes made in that market regarding maneuverability and equipment longevity.

Z-drives do require some additional thought in the design, Senner said. Because the boats have direct thrust instead of rudder-deflected thrust, the boat is much more maneuverable. But this can put as much as 100 percent more load on the push wires.

Senner said if the push wires are moved to the stern of the boat, and connected wider on the barges, the load can be managed while the boat still maintains its remarkable maneuverability. Senner suggested that as many as 70 percent of the bends that heavy tows have to flank can be steered with Steerprop azimuth Z-drives.

In addition, if a boat's wheels are damaged and need to be changed, a Z-drive boat does not need drydocking. Once the unit is lifted through a soft patch, the wheel can be changed in a matter of a few hours. Additionally, there are no rudders to be removed.

Another advantage is all Z-drive units equipped with nozzles rotate in the same direction, so there is no need to maintain right- and left-hand turning parts. One spare can be swapped for any of the other units of the same size.

Karl Senner Inc. has been a mainstay on the inland waterways for 40 years. With the newly implemented changes in management and an effort to move equipment to new, more efficient designs, odds are the company will be continue as a trendsetter for many more.

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