

## 25 years of SAWIKO: The anniversary interview with founding member Guido Kovermann

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**The SAWIKO success story began with four people in Hunteburg, in the district of Osnabrück, in 1995. What was the company's founding vision?**

Uwe Samland, Ralf Winter and I were already passionate campers at that time and so we knew the needs on the market for leisure vehicle accessories, towbars and load carrier systems. So in 1995 we decided to start our own business with the SAWIKO company.

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**What was customer demand and customer feedback in the early days?**

Admittedly, the first "main season" in March/April 1995 was extremely difficult because nobody had heard of us. The initial spark was the Caravan Salon in Dusseldorf in autumn 1995. That gave us the opportunity to present ourselves to the general public and thus the end customers. This went so well that we were positively overrun by customer demand. We did early, late and night shifts in the workshop, which was open 24 hours a day at that time. 18–19 hours of work per day was normal. Today I would ask, "Are you crazy?"

Even after that we were still doing everything ourselves. We went to every trade fair, assembled products ourselves, presented our products personally at campsites and worked through weekends. It was a very close family relationship with long working days. But after the work was done, you knew what you were doing it for.

**That sounds like an intensive phase. What happened next?**

Right at the beginning we had a large supplier for motorhomes on our side who taught us how to operate, and we worked with them in a very cooperative way for many years. In 1998, the company Dethleffs placed their trust in us and commissioned us for the frame extensions for all Fiat chassis.

I can also well remember moving into our new building in Neuenkirchen-Vörden in 1999 with all the associated expansion and growth measures in the following years. To step into your own building for the first time feels almost heroic and makes you so proud.

**Why was it important to set up your own production facilities?**

We've had our own production facility with laser and cutting machines at our site in Neuenkirchen-Vörden in Lower Saxony since 2004. Deciding to manufacture our own products meant that we became independent of external suppliers and were able to achieve enormous production speed, especially in the OEM business. If a customer wanted nine sets of frame extensions instead of seven, it was no problem. We produced the two sets overnight, quickly coated or galvanized them and the customer was happy. It gave us a real competitive edge at that time. And even today, our own production facility in Germany helps us to ensure our high quality standards for premium leisure vehicle accessories.

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**What did the takeover by the AL-KO Vehicle Technology Group mean for you?**

The idea that the industry leader AL-KO would be interested in us and even wanted to 'tie the knot' with us – we'd been dreaming about that for years. At the end of December 2011 we sold our company to the AL-KO Vehicle Technology Group. With this we have – to put it simply – made the AL-KO diamond shine a bit brighter by bringing in and expanding the aftermarket business.

**What was the key factor for you that made the takeover a success?**

It's quite clear that AL-KO has deliberately chosen not to change the strategy or the SAWIKO formula for success. This is still paying off today since the sale there has been a steady growth in turnover and employees.

**What is SAWIKO's recipe for successful economic stability?**

Our business is based on various pillars. Our customers include OEMs, retailers and end customers. If one column breaks, the other columns can compensate it. In 2008/09, for example, due to the OEM crisis, we stopped receiving orders from the OEM business overnight. However, we were able to maintain our site and secure jobs.

**What does the name SAWIKO stand for today?**

First and foremost, of course, innovative premium products for motor homes should be mentioned here. These include, for example, high-quality towbars, rear carriers, motorcycle loading aids or storage space extensions. SAWIKO also stands for an excellent price-performance ratio, 25 years of market experience and fair cooperation with our customers.

Within the AL-KO Vehicle Technology Group, we are also the experts for the entire aftermarket sector and have recently started selling selected products from AL-KO's Italian subsidiary CBE in the solar and energy management sector.

**Let's look to the future with the classic question – what's your wish for your anniversary?**

I wish that SAWIKO will continue to make an important contribution to the AL-KO Vehicle Technology Group as a successful brand in the future and impress our customers and partners with strong and innovative products. The foundation for this are our great employees, without whom we would never have made it this far.

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As a co-founder of SAWIKO, the continued existence of our founding location in Neuenkirchen-Vörden is naturally very close to my heart too. I am proud of the fact that considerable investment is being made in modern production technology here in the middle of the year, which is helping us to successfully continue our history of growth. But the greatest wish of all is that our parent company AL-KO continues to recognise that there must also be a few extraordinary fellas in the world. And some of these fellas sit in Neuenkirchen-Vörden and run a very successful business.



**Caption:** Last active founding member of SAWIKO, Guido Kovermann, in conversation.

#### **AL-KO Vehicle Technology Group**

Founded in 1931, AL-KO Vehicle Technology is now a global technology company with over 30 sites in Europe, South America, Asia and Australia. With high-quality chassis components for trailers, leisure vehicles and light commercial vehicles, AL-KO represents the best in ergonomics and functionality, maximum comfort as well as innovations to ensure greater driving safety. The company specialises in sophisticated innovation processes and has received several awards in this regard. The AL-KO Vehicle Technology Group is a wholly owned subsidiary of DexKo Global Inc, a portfolio company of KPS Capital Partners, LP.