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Teamwork for reusable masks

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC An example from our region shows how cross-company cooperation led to the foundation of a new business.

BY OUR EDITORIAL MEMBER **RAMONA POPP**



Luisa and Leo from the district of Lichtenfels gave the reusable plastic face masks a try.
Photo: Ralf Fischbach

District of Lichtenfels — The automotive industry is in the midst of a crisis. And it has been even before coronavirus. When manipulated exhaust values, climate change, and possible new engine forms became the topic of heated discussions, consumers reacted with uncertainty. The suppliers felt the effects of this – including INNOCEPT Engineering, a company that develops plastic components and has its origins in Redwitz. Today, the company is based in Kronach-Neuses. Until February, nobody there had ever thought that, one day, they would be involved in the production of face masks. Now, the innovative idea has quickly developed into a company.

Managing Director Birgit Partheymüller, who is a local of the district of Lichtenfels, remembers a meeting with friendly business partners in early March. At that time, it was not clear yet how dramatically coronavirus would spread across the world. Neither were the consequences of this. But the three companies discussed possible scenarios and concluded that if infection rates increased, there could be a global shortage of protective equipment. This gave rise to the idea of developing a face mask made of plastic that would not be a disposable product but sustainable and comfortable to wear. However, the design and construction of an injection mould alone, which is required for the production of plastic parts, costs a lot of money. The entrepreneurs, one of whom is the owner of an injection moulding company, wanted to tackle the matter together nevertheless.

There was a "plan B": If things did not turn out to be so bad with coronavirus after all, the intended face mask could still be marketed as a dust mask for the construction sector... What normally takes about two years was achieved in only six weeks with united forces. This proves: Not only is necessity the mother of invention, but team spirit can make things possible that seemed impossible at first. Using 3D printing, a prototype was produced and the production process was planned in record time. "We have received an incredible amount of support from our private and business networks during this time," states Birgit Partheymüller.

"We have received an incredible amount of support."

"We have received support in particular from the Lichtenfels Center of Next Generation Digital Technologies (Forschungs- und Anwendungszentrum für digitale Zukunftstechnologie, FADZ), from Kunststoff-Netzwerk-Franken, and from ofraCar - Automobilnetzwerk e. V." In the meantime, not only is series production underway, but a separate GmbH ("Providee"), whose Managing Director is Birgit Partheymüller, was founded. Own network also helped make the new product popular. "Many companies are in the process of obtaining masks for their employees," says the management expert who now spends almost her entire day preparing quotations and answering enquiries. Several thousand face masks have already been ordered and Birgit Partheymüller has also



distributed masks among her friends. "The feedback is very positive, it is simply fun to work for this company."

The highlight of the product is that you can use standard filter materials such as tissues, paper towels, non-woven or cotton fabrics.

Cleaning in the dishwasher

The plastic mask itself is made of recyclable TPE, which is also used in medical applications and adapts flexibly to the contours of the face. It can be cleaned in the washing machine or dishwasher and withstands high temperatures. Of course, it is important to note that it is officially a non-medical face mask that is not approved for highly infectious areas and medical purposes. But it is a practical alternative to sewn fabric masks or disposable masks. And it is definitely "made in Franconia".

Luisa and Leo, a young woman from the district of Lichtenfels and her younger brother, who can be seen in the picture above, for instance, were given the opportunity to try out the masks. Luisa seemed quite down to earth about the use of the mask – of course, she would rather do without it but this was currently out of the question.

According to the Managing Director, certifications are being sought for the future so that the mask can be used in the field of occupational safety.