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Interview with Dr. Markus Heering, Managing Director of VDMA Printing and Paper Technology Association

"virtual.drupa as a platform has global reach"

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, drupa 2021 cannot be held as a face-to-face event.

Therefore, the world's leading trade fair invites to a web event from April 20 - 23, 2021. In an interview, Dr. Markus Heering, managing director of the VDMA German Printing and Paper Technology Association, explains the decision in favour of virtual.drupa, the timetable up to drupa 2024 in Düsseldorf and his association's position on the cancellation of regular drupa due to the pandemic.

After the postponement and shortening of drupa 2021, the decision was made to hold it as *virtual.drupa*.

The pandemic is creating conditions in Germany, Europe and around the world under which a world-leading trade fair with tens of thousands of international visitors and exhibitors does not appear feasible. Hence the early commitment to a virtual trade fair so that companies have planning security.

What is your association's view on this decision?

We fully support them. Unfortunately there is no viable alternative. We also believe that the timing is right, so that the exhibitors do not even begin to invest time and money in the trade fair planning, which they will not get back in if they cancel at short notice.

Every four years drupa is the showcase and marketplace for innovations in printing and paper technology. Is it enough to wait until 2024 to stage the next regular drupa with visitors and exhibitors?

Drupa 2024 is a set date in the international trade fair calendar. When scheduling the event, international and regional industry trade fairs must be taken into account, as well as the other events organised by Messe Düsseldorf.

A date in 2023 is not possible if 2024 is firmly scheduled. And a further postponement to 2022 carries the risk that Corona will not be overcome by then. We therefore welcome the fact that Messe Düsseldorf is playing it safe.

Drupa 2021 was to be the signal for a new beginning, for a return to normal business. Can this signal also come from the online event?

Of course we hope so. Recently, so many companies and organisers have been inviting people to online events that the overview has been lost - and the response is dwindling. Often there are barely two dozen participants. But that's not worth the effort. This speaks for a platform with global reach, which as a brand stands for serious information and a direct line to relevant players in the market. This requirement profile is met by virtual.drupa.

We also want to show that our industry is alive and well. Many of our machines and products are particularly important in the Corona crisis because they are needed for the production of food and medicine packaging or help to spread important information. And drupa is also alive and well. After months of social distancing, web meetings and home office, there is a great need for encounters, real conversations and people-to-people contacts. Right now we must make the best of the situation. But it is clear to everyone that these are emergency solutions and that we want to return to the world we know. I am sure that visiting trade fairs will continue to be part of the world in the future.

Do you have any insight into how far your member companies are from "normality" in the pandemic year 2020?

Who would currently speak of "normality"? COVID-19 shapes everyday life and market events. This is reflected in incoming orders, in production, in short-time work and recently, unfortunately, also partly in redundancies. Our member companies try with all means to keep their employees and their know-how. After all, they need their staff - at the latest when the markets pick up again. But there are still few rays of hope, including rising demand from China. But travel restrictions, hygiene regulations and home office remain omnipresent and affect all areas, whether administration, design, production or service.

It is now proving to be a huge advantage that our industry has focused on digitization and networking so early on. Remote services make it possible to keep customers' machines running. And where service technicians are prevented from travelling, it is in many cases possible to provide digital instructions to customers' technicians for repairs. For users of print and paper processing technology who consistently automate and network their machines, this investment pays off in the crisis: They are less affected by quarantine-related personnel losses and they benefit from reduced downtime. We look forward to meeting many representatives of the international printing industry in virtual space at virtual.drupa in April 2021.

The VDMA Printing and Paper Technology Association is the mouthpiece of manufacturers of plant and systems for printing and print finishing, paper production and processing, and auxiliary equipment and devices. Together with the Forschungsgesellschaft Druckmaschinen e.V. (FGD) and PrintPromotion GmbH, the association offers its members services, for example on topics such as trade fairs, public relations, technology and research.