

Plastics to the fore

Maria Ciliberti, Ticona, on the potential of plastics and how to save money “almost automatically”

Last year's sponsor for the SPE's Innovations Award was Ticona.

Under the leadership of Maria Ciliberti, Global Automotive Director Ticona, the members of the jury met at the company's technical center in Auburn Hills, USA, to hear the nomination speeches. In the end only one Ticona product made it on to the winners' podium. However, this was directly by way of the Grand Award: the Twinsheet petrol tank.

Polymotive: Only one winner out of 8 is from Ticona. Is that something that worries you?

Ciliberti: (*Laughing*) Certainly not, in the end we have been selected as one of the best of the best. My intentions are to push the SPE Innovation Awards, not necessarily that Ticona win all of them. With the Innovation Awards I see an outstanding opportunity to show the automotive industry the kind of potential that plastics offer. And that will ultimately make everyone in the plastics sector winners too.

Polymotive: You've made an impressive job of showing exactly that. With just under 50 nominations, more than 750 Gala participants, the SPE Award must be the biggest event of its type worldwide. How far does it extend across America?

Ciliberti: Actually, as a global magazine, you are in a better position to answer this than I am, but I think it is, for a start, a clear signal to the North American market. For us, it is far more important to ensure that this (Award) achieves deep sector penetration. From the manufacturer of input materials to the machine manufacturer and tool maker, the small supplier and the large supplier and – it goes without saying – right through to the decision-making tiers of the OEMs, the event is meant to show what plastics today are capable of.

Polymotive: Isn't this something of which the OEMs and suppliers are already aware?

Ciliberti: Of course, but again and again in discussions we come across reservations, the developers or decision-makers have at some stage had bad experiences with plas-

tic and are now adopting a critical attitude to any plastics applications. What we want to do is show that plastic is THE material to get complexity and weight out of the automobile and to do this with a quality that can be appreciated by the automotive customer. And this 38th Awards Gala offers a wealth of great examples of this.

Polymotive: The word 'global' appears on your business card. Does this mean that you are now looking to get involved with SPE Europe too?

Ciliberti: I think, as far as the regional SPE Associations are concerned, we should work together more closely. The word 'global' on my Ticona business card is to be viewed more in the sense of customer orientation. Ticona provides intensive support for global platforms, such as the Ford B Platform or the GM Gamma. Ultimately, the OEM decides whether and, if so, where plastic is to make an entry. It is for this reason that we at Ticona have chosen to adopt a global approach, so as to develop alongside and together with the global OEMs in proximity to their headquarters and subsequently to be able to provide a regional supply service for the material required for the global platforms in all significant markets. This is our global approach. And I believe that Ticona is very well placed in this regard.

Polymotive: You have also worked in the world of automotive plastics in Europe for a long time. When you compare the current situation here in the USA with your experiences in Europe, what is the next thing to appear on the scene in North America going to be?



Maria Ciliberti at the SPE Innovations Award Gala (photo: SPE)



Alexander Büchler (left), Polymotive, with Maria Ciliberti, Global Automotive Director Ticona (photo: Polymotive)

Ciliberti: I have now been working here in the States for 7 years but I am very often in Europe and other important automotive markets like China and India. I think that here in North America an important step in the direction of composites will come, both in the structural area and in the non-visible as well as visible areas. These materials have huge potential.

Polymotive: You mean with composites made from fibre-reinforced materials?

Ciliberti: Yes, but not necessarily just glass fibres, I can well envisage carbon fibres integrated in a polymer matrix for large-volume production. When it comes to embedding the fibres lengthwise in the polymer matrix, pultrusion is definitely superior and an ideal way to go about this.

Polymotive: I reckon this is my 15th meeting with the automotive industry in North America and the first couple of words directly following the greeting have always been: Cost Reduction. So do your solutions actually save any money?

Ciliberti: (*laughs*) Of course, that is the most important subject! But whenever possible I try to hold off on this part of this discussion until later. It is only once we have understood what the customer wants, we have devised a satisfactory solution, have done away with the complexity and taken the weight out of the component, that we save money – at the end of the day, almost automatically. But, through all that, I tend to see the technical challenge first. Talking about savings beforehand can cloud the view as far as the best – and at the same time the most reasonably priced – solution is concerned.

Polymotive: Thank you, Maria!