

ACTIVE TEMPERATURE CONTROL

“Somebody has to lead the way!”

Why Dental-Union was the first mover in the dental sector to switch to ambient shipping, first for pharmaceuticals and then for medical products as well



In July last year, Dental-Union (DU) launched the first stage. In consultation with its shareholders, it switched the shipping of pharmaceuticals to ambient transport with trans-o-flex. Eleven months later, in June this year, the second stage followed. Since then, DU now also has items from the medical products range transported using the Ambient service. What had happened?

DU operates a central warehouse in Rodgau, situated about halfway between Frankfurt Airport and Aschaffenburg. From there, the company supplies everything that is used by dentists and needed for this purpose: from the material for a filling to anaesthetics, hygiene products, dentures, disinfection and instruments. Managing Director Stefan Bleidner: “We have a range of almost 100,000 products that are shipped from our warehouse directly to dentists and laboratories.”

“As far as I know, there is one other market competitor in the dental sector who ships medicines using active temperature control; in the medical products sector, we are the only supplier who has these products shipped using active tempera-

ture control,” says Bleidner. “This has caused a stir in the market because actively temperature-controlled transport is of course more expensive than standard shipping. Every package that is shipped via the ambient route reduces our shareholders’ margins.” Nevertheless, the decision to use ambient shipping was made together with the shareholders. Two reasons were decisive here.

“The top priority is, of course, maintaining product quality and patient safety.” On the one hand, Bleidner refers here to climate change, to the increasingly longer periods of heat and the temperatures that already prevail in the load compartment of trucks at normal outside temperatures. “If you transport filling material at 40 degrees, the material may break or have a much lower quality and durability.” However, product quality is at risk when using non-temperature-controlled shipping not only during the day, but also at night. “Night-time is not on many people’s radar, but this is where significant sub-zero temperatures can be reached in the vehicle during winter transport and therefore impact product quality.”



On the other hand, Bleidner cites the regulatory pressure regarding temperature-controlled shipping. “We are driven by the Medicines Act on the one hand and the new MDR on the other.” The Medical Device Regulation (MDR) is the European regulation for medical products. It officially came into force together with the In Vitro Diagnostics Regulation (IVDR) on 25 May 2017 and became mandatory from 26 May 2021 after a four-year transition period. “At Dental-Union, we have decided to abide by the rules and go ambient. We started with pharmaceuticals because that’s where the regulatory requirements are the clearest.” Not least in Germany, the regional councils are increasingly drawing attention to this. And Dental-Union, due to its shareholder structure and as a nationwide consignor, has dealings with every regional council in Germany. “Usually, only one regional council is responsible for our competitors who work regionally. We have to deal with all of them.” The regulatory practice is not always standardised. Some competitors are not under pressure from the regulatory authorities because not all regional councils are equally concerned with the temperature control of pharmaceutical shipments. But Bleidner has been told by several regional councils “that they don’t agree when goods that should be travelling at 15 to 25 degrees are transported without temperature control”.

For the 57-year-old, who joined DU in 2002 as a controller, became commercial managing director in 2007 and has been the sole managing director since 2018, one thing is certain: “The market is not yet sensitive to the risks involved in the transport of pharmaceuticals and medical products, but that will come. And the delivery of medical products will also come under the spotlight of the regulators at some point.”

Bleidner and DU, however, did not want to be among the driven, but preferred to drive the market forward. And since ambient shipments of pharmaceuticals went well right from the start, DU followed suit this year and also transports medical products via the Ambient service. “This is definitely also fuelled by the new MDR,” Bleidner admits. “Somebody has to lead the way!”

Especially since he also sees opportunities to score points with customers as the first mover. “The problem is that customers often don’t even know which transport service is used to ship their orders and what risks are associated with inadequate temperature control.” To change this, Dental-Union gave customers a small gift in the summer. All consignees who had goods delivered via the Ambient service received two cool packs with the consignment, which were provided with a sleeve. The sleeve (see picture) drew the consignees’ attention on the front to how “easy & cool” ordering and the actively temperature-controlled delivery were. On the back it says, among other things: “Now we also deliver many of your medical products with temperature-controlled shipping. It will be hard for anyone to achieve the same result quickly.”



This summer, Dental-Union sent 10,000 of these cool packs to customers who received goods via the Ambient service to draw attention to their safe shipping.

Who is Dental-Union?

At first glance, Dental-Union is an unusual company. This is because the company, founded in 1967, has neither its own distribution nor customer relations. The 14 shareholders of the company handle both. They have contact with their end customers, who are, in this case, dentists, laboratories, clinics or medical care centres. At second glance, Dental-Union thus proves to be a lean and focused company. Its (almost) exclusive purpose is to operate a central warehouse for dental products and to organise the best possible shipping service on behalf of the shareholders. By establishing a central warehouse, the individual depots operated by the shareholders were able to offer a more extensive product range without giving up their established regional identity and the all-important direct contact with local customers.

Today, Dental-Union operates one of Europe's largest central warehouses for dental supplies in Rodgau, Hesse. On a total area of more than 11,000 square metres, over 37,000 immediately available items are stored on two floors, sourced from suppliers all over the world. The approximately 100 affiliated depots operated by the shareholders in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Albania and the



*Stefan Bleidner,
Managing Director
at Dental-Union*

Netherlands can place orders around the clock in Rodgau. All orders received by 5 pm are processed directly, shipped and reach the customer the next day. More than 57,000 additional items can be procured at short notice. This means that the shareholders of Dental-Union have access to a total range of 94,000 dental products from over 400 manufacturers for their customers.

In addition to operating the central warehouse, Dental-Union organises international distribution, which is not handled by the shareholders. For this, the company relies on independent sales partners who are based from Stockholm to Bergamo and from St. Petersburg to Madrid. ■