

Twenty years later, step by step, Project 2000 has made its way up the market

Solidly anchored to the motorhome and caravan sector, the Florence based manufacturer has achieved an important goal, with twenty years in business. Innovation in products and production processes: these are the keys to development, extending market range and improving internal efficiency.



Niccolò Nardini
 Production Manager

Words Giorgio Carpi



As everybody knows, some birthdays are more important than others, and must be celebrated a little more emphatically. And a look back at the past is also inevitable. Project 2000 was founded in 1995, so this year marks its first twenty years in business. Twenty years which, in hindsight, are not many when compared to the company's remarkable growth. What's striking about Project 2000 is in fact its constant development, year after year, which has transformed it from a small business to a solid industrial reality. And what's more, from a limited business outlook based solely on the region of Tuscany, a key area for the caravan sector in Italy, Project 2000 has expanded its range to continental Europe first and then globally, in America foremost, as well as in Asia and Australia. From what can essentially be defined as a single-product company, focusing on the production of electric steps, Project 2000 has become a multi-form manufacturing reality, with a product spanning over different market segments. It is a fact that few manufacturers in the industry have managed to develop at such a rate, capable of riding the downturn of the economic crisis with their head held high. The reasons for this success are not a mystery. On the one hand, the Nardini family, the company's owners,

have sought to diversify production, and while remaining anchored to the caravan sector, have been able to propose innovative ideas and projects, interpreting emerging sectors and also creating new trends, as in the case of drop-down beds. On the other hand, Project 2000 has also entered new markets: we need only consider that the company arrived in America just recently, say a few years ago, but America has already become one of its major markets. However, we mustn't forget to mention that a significant contributing factor to the company's growth has been its investment in machinery, high-tech and information technology.

Evolving production technologies

Niccolò Nardini, production manager at Project 2000 and son of the company owners, explains in detail: "Initially we made use of traditional, handmade systems. Metals were cut, welded and processed with a significant amount of workmanship. We used band saws, welders and drill presses. However, from the start, we understood that we needed to invest in machinery with a high level of automation. Therefore, just a few years after establishing the company, we bought our first numerical control bending machine. Then in 2000, we installed a pun-

ching machine, also capable of functioning as a shear. In those years, we manufactured only steps, but the orders kept on growing. We then purchased the first two special machines, custom built to our needs, with which we could cut an aluminium bar and fit an anti-slip rubber insert. This allowed us to significantly cut down on production time for this phase, while notably increasing the product's quality."

Between 2004 and 2007 the company had to manage a strong period of growth, with a significantly increasing turnover and personnel hiring, as a result of a progressive opening of markets abroad, after our first appearance at the Caravan Salon in Düsseldorf in 2000, and the introduction of two new product ranges: the TV supports on the one hand, and the lifting systems for rear beds. In 2004 the first laser cutter arrived at the Project 2000 production site, followed by two robotic bending and welding machines.

"The use of advanced machinery," explains Niccolò Nardini, "allowed us to detach ourselves completely from outsourcers, as well as significantly improving both product quality and production times, thereby gaining on competitiveness."

The latest arrival is an automated milling machine with 14 controlled axes, i.e. an auto-



mated work center capable of working on all bar corners up to 7 meters in length, with 6 spindles and an additional 600mm diameter blade for cutting the bar to measure, but also usable as a milling machine, with a semi-automatic unloader. The goal is to heighten the machine's level of autonomy, with an unloader that is totally automated. The automated milling machine is used today at Project 2000 to process all special profiles and the like used in its products.

The advent of Information Technology in production processes

The computerized management of production processes is the other pillar on which the company's internal evolution rests. "In 2004, we acquired our first management software," Niccolò Nardini points out, "and we began managing the first BOMs. We understood that, having reached a certain company size, a control system for monitoring the various production processes, at every stage of production, became inevitable." In 2011 the company took a big leap forward, progressively introducing an advanced management software, capable of dialoguing with all company departments, from the design department to shipping and purchasing, and to the stock department and production. "With the start-up of the management system," continues Nardini, "our way of working totally changed. Once a customer has analyzed a design project and prototype and

gives its approval, we begin to enter all the data into the management software. Having full control over the whole planning and production process, we can make our customer an offer that takes all factors into account, with very little or no risk on costs and delivery times. When we go into production, the program automatically creates purchase orders for the various materials. The management software allows us to optimize orders by combining similar orders and stocks. Each assembly station is connected to the information system, and an exploded view of the product being assembled can be displayed on the screen, with the various indications of parts and assembly methods. There's been an effective improvement in quality, in addition to controlling delivery times and, essentially, an improvement in overall efficiency. The software house has developed a specific product for our needs, and this has allowed us to enhance our performance, and be more competitive. Operating from the design phase to sales, the management software has significantly reduced errors during the various processing phases, and has enabled us to cut back on costs while raising product quality and service levels."

In 2010, in an effort to manage its increasing workload, Project 2000 decided to expand its operating structure, creating new production departments and administrative offices, as well as design and sales management departments. A warehouse improvement program

was also initiated, which has now been definitively completed and is entirely operative. The system avails itself of four vertical automated storage areas: these are tower units, compared to the old lengthwise warehouse system, allowing for effective savings in terms of space and time. Indeed, pick-up times for goods have been greatly reduced: operators no longer move back and forth along the shelves, but simply enter orders and wait for the machine to deliver a box with the product. A coding system for the stockroom was also put in place, using barcodes, allowing for the total monitoring of all items.

Following a surprising boom in the semi-integrated market with drop-down beds, Project 2000 recently expanded its production site, adding an extra 1500 square meters of covered surface area, for an overall production surface area of 5200 sq. m. This has allowed the company to manufacture finished products, i.e. the whole bed, complete with the spring box frame and lifting mechanism. Beds are still assembled prevalently manually, admits Niccolò Nardini, but assembly times have been optimized for the better, and we're working on further improvements through major investments.

At this point, we'll be curious to discover what inventions Project 2000 has in store for us in the coming twenty years, and what innovations it will introduce in its production processes to promptly satisfy market demands for its quality products.

