



Success stories

UNITED SOFT DRINKS

## Streamlined structures

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**When making large investments, maintaining close, long-term business relations often helps to avoid the otherwise usual extra loops in the procedure.** / This is true of Dutch beverage producer United Soft Drinks and KHS, for instance, who have been working together for 25 years.

NON-RETURNABLE PET

RETURNABLE PET

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### PHOTOGRAPHY / ILLUSTRATION

Frank Reinhold

### COVER PHOTO

KHS and customer closing ranks (from left to right): Hennie van der Graaf (KHS), Pieter Overdijk (United Soft Drinks) and Ronald Stesmans (KHS).

When you visit the United Soft Drinks plant in Goor in the Netherlands, you're not greeted by the security doorman as you might expect. Instead, you're obliged to pass the office of production manager Pieter Overdijk in order to gain access to the number two facility owned by the biggest beverage producer in the Netherlands. Overdijk is at home in many fields; he's not only responsible for production but also for any building measures required, machine procurement and financial contract details. "As a family business we have a flat organizational structure and do everything," he laughs, comparing his workforce of just 24 employees with that of a large-scale brewery. "Here, there are often four or five hundred people working. If, for example, the brewery switches from wooden to plastic pallets, someone is specifically entrusted with this sole task. At our company, this is just one job of many." It's thus good for the company that Overdijk's team is extremely motivated and excellently trained, as he proudly emphasizes. If, for instance, a Dutch retail partner wants a new bottle shape for one of its own brands from United Soft Drinks, Overdijk and his colleagues pragmatically ensure that the altered design is on the shelves within the space of only six to eight weeks.

## **Highly efficient**

The organizational structure at United Soft Drinks is as streamlined as Overdijk is slim. "Unlike in international concerns we bottle in two-shift operation only," the production manager explains, who has been running the bottling plants in Goor and Utrecht for six years. "In this time we process a production quantity many comparable companies would need much longer for." One of the reasons for this high level of efficiency is that the production shops are practically devoid of operators. Sometimes visitors even ask where all the employees are, smile Overdijk and Hennie van der Graaf, the manager of KHS Benelux, with whom the former has been working for 25 years – as long as Overdijk himself has been with United Soft Drinks. "The people here and at the main bottling plant in Utrecht are really extremely qualified and highly professional," confirms van der Graaf. "They know exactly what they have to do and when which consumables have to be supplied where so that our machines can run without stopping." It then sometimes looks as if

everything's working on its own, says van der Graaf – an unusual scenario indeed. Astonished guests he has had occasion to show a KHS line to at United Soft Drinks have often jokingly accused him of staging some kind of sales trick. “We're not very far off what's known as a dark line\* here,” Overdijk reports confidently, “even if of course we don't manage 100,000 bottles an hour.” An output of 30,000 bottles per hour is easily achieved by the new PET line installed by KHS, however.

There's another good reason for this; in United Soft Drinks' production shop you won't find any maintenance engineers walking around with a laptop. “These are reserved for us managers,” quips Overdijk and describes why this is also a sign of quality regarding the processes at his facility. “To avoid errors we don't allow our engineers to independently intervene in the machine software. Only the specialists can do so whom we send to the line if an alarm is triggered.”

\* Dark line = fully-automatic production line which requires no machine operators

## **Five facts:**

**When?** Founded in 1962 in Koog aan de Zaan close to Amsterdam as Drankenindustrie Raak

**What?** Mineral water, near-water beverages, isotonic sports drinks, soda pop and fruit syrup

**In which containers?** PET bottles (250 milliliters, 330 milliliters, 500 milliliters, 750 milliliters, 1.5 liters and 2.0 liters), cartons (1.0 liter and 2.0 liters) and cans (250 milliliters and 5.0 liters)

**How much?** 150 million liters per year

**To which regions?** The Netherlands, Belgium, United Kingdom, Germany and France

↗ [www.usd.nl](http://www.usd.nl)



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A strong team (from left to right):  
Ronald Stesmans, Hennie van der  
Graaf (both KHS) and Pieter Overdijk.

“In two-shift operation we process a production quantity many comparable companies would need much longer for.”

Peter Overdijk  
Production manager, United Soft Drinks

## Sports drink pioneer

The company’s most successful brand is its AA Drink, the first Dutch sports drink to be launched to market 25 years ago at the same time United Soft Drinks entered into business with KHS. An

isotonic refreshment especially for sportsmen and women, it's now available in several different flavors at beverage retailers and in every fitness studio in Benelux. AA Drink appears as a sponsor of many big sporting events, such as, most recently, the 2016 European Athletics Championships in Amsterdam and the Rotterdam and Berlin marathons. In addition to its commitment to horse and bike racing the brand also supports Dutch Olympia participants and numerous local sports clubs in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Under the RAAK brand name United Soft Drinks markets a fruit syrup for making soda pop at home which is available in seven different flavors. From 1962 to 1998 the company was also called RAAK. The brand is a household name throughout the Netherlands – and was so even when Hennie van der Graaf, now 66, was still a child. The cylindrical shape of the PET bottle is characteristic of the brand and designed to remind consumers of the slim – and much more expensive – can the syrup used to be filled into.



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The flip-top cap on bottles of AA Drink is popular for its easy handling among professional and amateur sportsmen and women. It can be quickly opened and closed with one hand. This is especially useful for cyclists, of whom there are many in the Netherlands.



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The heart of the new line at United Soft Drinks is the stretch blow molder/filler block without a buffer tank but with an adapted capper.

## **Complete package**

The new KHS line, the third by the Dortmund systems supplier now at the bottling plant in Goor, includes a stretch blow molder/filler block, flash pasteurizer, suitable sleever, tray shrink packer and palletizer and pallet wrapper. What's special about the line is that instead of the usual buffer tank connected to a CIP installation what's known as a product return loop has been set up in the flash pasteurizer. This keeps the product moving in the carousel during machine downtime, making the otherwise necessary empty runs and line rinsing superfluous. This saves time. "Unlike beer our products are not sensitive to overpasteurization," explains Ralph Schapink, who as Goor's plant manager was involved in the project right from the beginning. "For us, it's more important to prevent the loss of time and product associated with the otherwise standard process."

## **Individual adaptations**

AA Drink makes one particular technical demand of the new KHS filling line: unlike most sports drinks the product neither has a simple screw cap nor a symmetrical circular sports cap. The lid instead consists of a flip-top closure hinged on one side which competitive sportsmen and women favor for its practical handling. Ronald Stesmans, technical sales engineer at KHS Benelux, describes what this means for KHS. "Whereas in a normal capper the head consists of a cylindrical part which is lowered onto the bottle and cap and closes them, for the energy drinks a three-section gripper head had to be developed which holds and turns the asymmetrical cap as if in a clamp."

In place of the roll-fed labeler in operation at United Soft Drinks to date, the line was equipped with a Fuji sleever. Sleviers are often used for products which are filled without carbon dioxide. With these, in time the amount of nitrogen used to pressurize the bottle after filling decreases and the container shrinks. Unlike a label a sleeve doesn't become loose.

# Hightech in Holland

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## Excerpt from the machine list

### **Blow molder/filler block**

InnoPET BloFill

### **Blender**

Innopro Paramix C

### **Flash pasteurizer**

Innopro KZE

### **CIP unit**

Innopro CIP

### **Tray shrink packer**

Innopak Kisters TSP

### **Palletizer**

Innopal PBL-1

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At United Soft Drinks the KHS Innopro KZE flash pasteurizer does without a buffer tank thanks to what's known as a product return loop.

For Pieter Overdijk these adaptations were an important criterion when selecting a suitable technological partner. “We may be a relatively small customer but we have over 25 years of experience in what we do. We thus also have a very precise idea of what we need. Standard solutions aren't always a help to us.” At United Soft Drinks' headquarters in Utrecht, where Overdijk spent many years as plant manager, everything used to be filled into one 1.5-liter bottle on a single PET filling line. There are now five different models. Not only are fast format changeovers thus of increasing importance to Overdijk but also the willingness with which suppliers react to his special requirements. “We expect our machine manufacturers to have exactly the same degree of flexibility our customers expect from us.”

## **Based on trust**

In KHS, and especially in his contacts Hennie van der Graaf, Ronald Stesmans and Coen van Arum, who as service manager for KHS Benelux has also been involved from the start, Pieter Overdijk has found just the partner who can offer him all this. He can deal with them just as relaxed and 'streamlined' as United Soft Drinks conducts its business: "Where at least six people are often sat around the table for projects like our new line, here we arrange everything among ourselves," says the production manager. "We know the people in the organization and maintain close, personal contact." KHS and United Soft Drinks are like two families, thinks van der Graaf, and Overdijk adds, "I wouldn't describe the close trust we share with KHS to merely be one advantage of our cooperation; I think it's the basis on which this is founded."

## *Any further questions?*

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