

THE SNIFFERS | PROFILE

More than Man's Best Friend

Leak detection however small, followed by proper maintenance activity, reduces the risks of incidents and fire, and improves safety. The Sniffers is an innovative and growing service provider, a €9 million turnover success that started out with a pipe leak and a dog. Colin Chinery reports.

IF there is a heaven-scent nose for a brand name, it went to work here in the Belgian town of Balen.

"The company started with dogs sniffing for leaks, initially on the ground and later underground. And of course from that moment the choice of company name was pretty easy," smiled The Sniffers CEO Bart Wauterickx.

Founded in 1991, The Sniffers is a specialist service provider identifying current and future leaks in pipelines and installations in the oil and gas industry,

providing technology and advice for emissions reduction, energy losses and maintaining pipeline network integrity.

"It is essential for decision makers to have access to objective, accurate and relevant data regarding critical installations and pipelines," said Mr Wauterickx. "With operators looking for useful insights and actionable recommendations, The Sniffers provides them with advice on how to meet their safety, health, environment, energy and output objectives."

For pipeline operators, safety and integrity are a major accountability issue, requiring

them to demonstrate and document the 24/7 integrity of their pipeline facilities as well as assess and mitigate risk factors.

Reducing emissions can occur in any phase of oil and gas development, and The Sniffers offers a set of innovative services for transportation, production, monitoring and maintenance; techniques that reduce project emissions and prevent major impacts.

Multi benefits

The Sniffers' LDAR Fugitive Emission Management Program for example, has completed more than 6,000 leak detection

projects around the world over the past 25 years. Going beyond the minimum requirements mandated by regulators, the programme allows management to turn the data-driven advice into a business competitive advantage in safety, health, maintenance cost, production output, quality and social responsibility.

In-house developed IT tools enable The Sniffers to report to clients at a high level. Transparent, and with the data available to be sliced and diced, these reports are invaluable for customer capability.

"We see competitors delivering a report of a couple of pages while we deliver 100 pages. That is the difference," said Mr Wauterickx. Customers can also enquire via a web tool into past plant behaviour – for example, the top ten leaking sources for carcinogenic vapours. "These kinds of enquiries are a piece of cake with our software."

Corporate programmes with bigger companies sees The Sniffers working with health and safety executives to measure and benchmark procedures across different plants.

"Aside from the total losses and emissions, we can drill down and easily compare different sites within a company and learn where one site can improve versus another," added the CEO. "We can easily expand on benchmarking and relate it to measurements we have recorded across the world."

"If, for example, a company has five refineries, we can do internal benchmarking across the five and compare the findings with 60 other refineries and learn from those comparisons."

The right answers

With every project a customised project, The Sniffers' 25 years of knowledge and experience on an international level is hugely important, said Mr Wauterickx. "Over the past years, we have invested in a very broad range of equipment. Whether it is used above ground or below ground, in a refinery or chemical plant, we have the right measuring equipment available for the customer."

"The understanding that we have of international legislation is also very valuable for the customer, and having

carried out projects all over the world, we are aware of all the differences in legislation and know exactly what is required."

The €9 million turnover company's status as an independent service provider is another market differentiator. "Some of our competitors are linked to a manufacturer for example or a maintenance company. We, on the other hand, are completely independent. Not linked to any kind of equipment or service means we give the figures and the real truth. And our customers value that."

Emerging technology services include highly accurate stack emissions monitoring, and drone measuring capability – Drone Optical Gas Imaging – where a gas imaging camera detects leaks in hitherto non-accessible places.

So, from DOGI back to Dogs: first on the leak detection scene and still a unique and critical part of The Sniffers operation.

"Measuring technology became available soon after the company began and over the years, we have invested heavily into this growing area," said Mr Wauterickx. "But throughout, we have retained our capability of dogs. While measuring ▶

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equipment is normally limited to recall parts per million – ppm – a dog can smell parts per billion, which is a thousand times more sensitive.”

Nothing like a Dog

The Sniffers deploys a team of seven dogs – after experimentation with a number of breeds finally settling on the Belgian Malinois – all with specialist scent capabilities and ready for engagement anywhere in the world. “We train dogs for specific chemicals and there is a very specific reason for this,” explained Mr Wauterickx.

“If you walk into an industrial estate you can normally smell all kinds of chemicals and you do not want the dog barking for everything. If a customer wants to know

whether there is a leak in his underground pipeline for say, polyethylene, you need to have a dog sensitive for polyethylene and not for crude oil. The detection of illegal pipeline tapping is another specialist skill of our dogs.”

Very bright dogs aside, finding the human capabilities to drive future growth is an emerging issue. “Currently, we have a staff of 90 running a €9 million business; a small business, flexible, agile, customer-oriented in a highly niche market.

“Expanding into new countries is a challenge and to realise the growth, you need to find the right people. We are a people business. We do not sell products; we sell services, sending our people to customers across the world and to many different

cultures. Finding the right people with the right capabilities to enable that growth is definitely a challenge I see ahead.”

In a continuingly tough period in the oil and gas sector, The Sniffers’ market share is growing. “We are proud to say that. It is growing in the Middle East and we are keeping a stable market share in our core markets in Belgium and the Netherlands.

“We have seen some of our customers decreasing their programmes in environmental management and of course emission measurement is an environmental programme.

“In Western countries, there is pretty strict legislation, and companies are obliged to have programmes with defined frequencies. But in some other parts of the world legislation is in its infancy. With the obligation of quarterly or annual measurement campaigns not embedded, it is easy for companies to postpone or reduce the scope of those projects.”

But Mr Wauterickx is seeing a positive trend. “With low oil prices going to be around for a while, companies are adapting themselves and trying to find room again

for environmental programmes. They feel responsible for their presence in our society and want to take up their social responsibilities.

Global growth forecast

“As a company, we like to grow; geographically – I believe we will get stronger in several countries where our knowledge will be of real benefit – and also with new services to our existing customers.

“We are in a very good market position in the Middle East, and we continue our efforts in France, Germany and Eastern Europe. South America, where legislation is getting more and more embedded, is an upcoming area as is South East Asia.”

With Iran now predicting a 25% rise in crude oil prices, The Sniffers is fast building strong links in the sanction-free state, recently appointing Asia Watt Engineering Co as its strategic representative.

“Iran is the world’s second biggest gas producing country and the fourth when it comes to oil. It is an important market for us, and now that Iran is open again, we would very much want to play a role in its future.”

