

Andreas Hoffmann

Discreet Highflyer

Greencells is one of the top 10 solar companies in Europe. Now the company wants to take off in Germany as well.



Greencells Solar Park: The project pipeline of the company is full to bursting.

Greencells

Kathrin Witsch Düsseldorf

Considering that Greencells is one of the largest solar groups in Europe, surprisingly little can be found about the company from Saarbrücken. Yet the project developer has long been one of the big names in the industry. Now it also wants to take off in its home market of Germany.

The fact that Greencells is a big unknown in its own country is also due to the fact that it builds its solar parks almost exclusively abroad. "For a long time, the German market was almost non-existent for us", says founder Andreas Hoffmann in an interview with Handelsblatt. That only changed again as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic, he says. Now Greencells has initiated its first major project in Saarland. "And there will be several more to follow", Hoffmann announces.

Greencells develops, finances and builds solar parks all over the world. The company is active in more than 25 countries and now has more than 300 employees. With an installed capacity of 2.2 gigawatts, the project developer is one of the top 10 solar companies in Europe.

Now, consulting firm EY, has nominated Greencells as Entrepreneur of the Year 2021. The award aims to recognise "entrepreneurial excellence" around the world. The winners will be announced in early November.

But even without the award, Green-

cells has done more than well in recent years. Sales more than tripled from 2015 to 2020. 2021 will even be "the best year in the company's history", says Hoffmann. The only area where the company still has some catching up to do is in terms of profits. According to the federal register, it rose only minimally in the same period and even fell from 2.3 million euros (2019) to just over 500,000 euros last year due to Corona. According to Hoffmann, the weak margins are due to the high investments of the past years. Now, however, profits should also increase significantly. Because the project pipeline is full to bursting: Greencells has a contract value of more than 800 million euros. In view of the global solar boom, this is not likely to change anytime soon.

At the same time, the 43-year-old managing director and the media presence of his company are a rather inconspicuous appearance. In his plain light-colored sweater over a dark shirt, Hoffmann is not at all reminiscent of the flamboyant birds of the old world à la Solarworld founder and self-proclaimed sun king Frank Asbeck. Yet Greencells has been around for eleven years. Unlike Solarworld, Q-Cells and so many others, the Saarland company survived the crisis of 2012.

After the lavish subsidies were massively cut back at that time, the market initially collapsed. Numerous companies went bankrupt in the home country of the global solar industry.

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Andreas Hoffmann
Founder of Greencells



Whereas in 2010 more than 133,000 people were still employed in the PV industry, today there are just 50,000. The manufacturers of solar modules and other components for photovoltaics were particularly hard hit. What has remained are mainly the planners and operators of the parks, to which Greencells also belongs.

In the German solar industry, however, Greencells is very well known and also has a good reputation. Not least because today's competitors, including project developers such as Juwi, used to be customers of the Saarland company. Yet the founding of the company was more a coincidence than anything else.

From career changer to high flyer

Anyone who takes a look at Hoffmann's curriculum vitae might be taken aback, at least briefly. Hoffmann started his studies in systems engineering and law, but never finished them. Afterwards, he ended up in the advertising industry as a career changer, with his own agency. This had very little to do with solar. In 2008, however, he decided to sell his company. When some of his employees were subsequently not taken on, Hoffmann looked for a job for them - and found what he was looking for at Conergy, one of the largest and oldest solar companies in Germany at the time.

Initially, Greencells only installed the solar modules. "However, it became clear to us relatively quickly that we needed to position ourselves more broadly in order to be more financially independent", explains Hoffmann. So, without further ado, he got involved in project development himself and has not regretted it to this day. Conergy went bankrupt in 2013, but Greencells survived the crisis.

The main reason for this was that even then, the main business was almost exclusively abroad. While the German solar market collapsed, business for Greencells in the rest of the world continued. However, the rapidly growing company could not be managed entirely without support.

In 2018, the two founders Hoffmann and Marius Kisauer sold 50 percent of the shares to the Saudi Arabian investor group Zahid, a family business based in Jeddah. The only point at which founder Hoffmann runs into slight explanatory trouble. After all, a Saudi investor family is not necessarily the ideal backer for a sustainable solar company that wants to stand for the modern future of the energy world. "However, the Zahids didn't make their money with oil, but with infrastructure projects long before the fossil fuel boom", says Hoffmann.

Cover base load from renewable energy

"We have always tried to think ahead. For every project, we check whether our hybrid concept could be implemented instead of a simple solar park", says Hoffmann. So-called hybrid power plants refer to projects in which not only a solar farm is built, but also wind turbines and storage facilities. "We want to show that renewables can also generate a base load and do so without laying miles of new power grids." To achieve this, Greencells is working with wind turbine manufacturer Siemens Gamesa, among others.

Base load refers to the amount of electricity that is generally required to permanently meet the basic needs of a highly developed industrialized country like Germany. If the electricity from the fluctuating generation of wind and solar can be stored temporarily and called up again when the sun is not shining or the wind is not blowing, renewables can also cover this base load. Enough hybrid power plants could bridge the slack phases - so the theory goes. Greencells wants to prove exactly that in practice. The first projects are already underway.

Hoffmann and his colleagues were inspired above all by the 360-degree thinking of solar pioneer Reiner Lemoine. The entrepreneur was considered one of the industry's masterminds and with Solon and Q-Cells founded two of Germany's largest and most successful solar companies already back in the late 1990s. "Lemoine already had the idea of hybrid power plants back then, and now 35 years later they are becoming reality", Hoffmann enthuses.

Lemoine, who died in 2006, had been a good friend of his father who, as an engineer, had also been intensively involved with renewable energies from an early age. Perhaps Hoffmann's path to the solar world was not such a great coincidence after all.