

Socage has shown how a company based in one of the economically worst hit countries in Europe can successfully work its way through a crises. The Italian manufacturer's president Fiorenzi Flisi talks to Euan Youdale about its latest plans.

Taking the initiative



The new 74 m working height Forste 75TJJ is the biggest platform in Socage's range.



It has not been easy for companies in Italy over the last few years. That is why manufacturers based there have expanded their export markets by up to 80% since the financial crash.

This was certainly true for most of the companies at the SAIE exhibition in Bologna, Italy, which took place at the end of October. Among them was Socage with one of the biggest outdoor stands in an otherwise depleted show compared to its glory years up to 2008.

Reinvention and transformation has been a necessity for those companies wishing to survive the Italian market and Socage has been through more changes than most during this period. The company was acquired by Fiorenzi Flisi in August 2009 from Italian knuckle boom crane manufacturer Fassi Gru.

Mr Flisi is one of this industry's true entrepreneurs; having been with the Fassi group for 10 years, he founded access equipment manufacturer Oil&Steel, which was sold in in 2007 when a majority of the four partners in the company at the time decided to sell it.

By 2008 Fassi was finding that running an access equipment company and an articulated truck mounted crane producer had fewer synergies than first thought and eventually

Fiorenzi Flisi, Socage president and owner.

approached Mr Flisi with an offer of sale in 2009.

As Mr Flisi explains, he wanted to remain in the access industry, and the offer was a good one so he took it. Jokingly, he adds, "If I had realised the crisis was going to be so long I would have thought twice about buying it."

Nevertheless, under Mr Flisi's direction

Socage booms reach into the sky at the SAIE exhibition in Bologna, Italy.



Socage has grown in these difficult times from 40 to 100 employees and with a new range of products. Expansion outside Italy has seen exports rise substantially; in 2011 the company saw €22 million sales in the domestic market with an additional €12 million coming from export. By 2013 export had risen to €24 million, while domestic sales had dropped to €4 million.

As Mr Flisi explains the drop in domestic sales was both a result of a concerted concentration in exports, away from domestic growth, and the plummeting Italian economy.

“In 2009 we decided to export but when we then saw the economic situation in Italy, we had to really change tactics. It was something we had planned but it was also something we were forced to do - we hadn't expected such a crisis in Italy.”

AFRICA CALLING

One of the export initiatives includes a recently set up subsidiary in Tunisia, North Africa. Mr Flisi explained that Tunisia was chosen because it was one of the ‘safest places’ on the continent to make a base and thanks to a chance introduction to its former owners. The plant will provide assembly and after sales service and will concentrate on the A pick-up mounted and DA articulated truck mounted series’ at the lower end of the manufacturer’s working height range.

“We have always thought that the African market was growing, so there is nothing new there, and we met a company that was having financial problems, so we took the best people from that company and started our own company.”

The company was affiliated to truck manufacturer Iveco in Tunisia, so the workers taken on by the new subsidiary Socage Nord Afrique were suited to assembling platforms on truck chassis.



The patented X-Factor outriggers claim to be lighter, stronger and more versatile than competing X-type outriggers.

Socage expects to sell 40 units in the area during 2015, all of which will be assembled there. As Mr Flisi explains Africa has a lot of mining potential and raw materials but needs infrastructure, there is also major growth in the number of electricity powerlines in the country, which is ideally suited to Socage’s equipment.

Libya is also a good source of sales, thanks in part to domestic oil company Jackol, which has bought a large number of machines.

Socage has also made its first foray into the van mount sector with the 12 m working height forSte 12VT, first launched at APEX. The forSte 14VTJ version with jib will be available soon, aimed at the UK market.

“There are big sales of this equipment in France and UK, for example, so we thought we would see if we could get into these markets with a van.”

So far Socage has sold 10 units to Spain and four to France, “We hope to sell 1000 next year,” adds Mr Flisi. The company does not have any plans for more van mounts yet.

RANGE TOPPER

The Forste 75TJJ was a new launch at SAIE. It has a 74 m working height, a 40 m outreach and 600 kg basket capacity. The one on show at SAIE was on a 32 m tonne truck, which, says the company, means it can be driven anywhere in Europe. However, the platform can be fitted to any truck chassis. The Forste 75TJJ is also designed to be transformed into a lower working height model; for example a 57 m version can be created by using one less extension and the jib.

“The 74 m was a goal we wanted to achieve but we are not planning on going higher,” Says Mr Flisi.

Last but not least on the manufacturer’s



A bird's eye view of Socage's new X-Factor outriggers.

list of new products is the patented X-Factor outrigger. The new outriggers do not conform to a typical x-shape with all four legs joined in the middle of the truck chassis. Instead, they are offset against each other at the joining area, allowing for stronger, lighter structure with reduced dimensions, as well as easier installation.

The X-Factor also means it can be fitted on any truck in any part of the world, meaning that the chassis does not have to be purpose built. “We had a problem in the past when people had to adapt the chassis themselves.

“For example, we sold a kit to Panama. We told them to buy some steel sections for the chassis, but they bought something round instead of square. So they did not know what to do.

“We sell aerial parts and stabilisers but not the truck chassis, so we couldn't do a different one for each truck. This product can now be adjusted for any chassis. So now we just supply the whole platform including the X-Factor, so the customer just has to mount it. They do not need any engineers or technicians”

Mr Flisi adds, “This has helped us in places like Africa to find a dealer, as anyone who sells trucks could potentially be our dealer.” **AI**