



## COVER STORY LURING INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYERS

### German manufacturers find Forsyth's a good fit [Forsyth County, GA]

Word-of-mouth promotions from German companies that arrived in county decades ago draw followers.

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Call it the German Connection.

Forsyth County, which generally flies under the radar when compared with its larger neighbors such as Fulton and Gwinnett, has been successful at tapping into a rich vein of global growth — German companies looking to expand.

“Five of our 10 largest international employers are German,” said Randall Toussaint, vice president of economic development at the Cumming-Forsyth County Chamber of Commerce. A baker’s dozen of German firms in the county includes four with a name that starts with Siemens, a global powerhouse in energy, manufacturing and health care.

The county may not look like an international hotbed. As cars wend their way down a two-lane road to turn into the industrial park called the Meadows, horses graze on the other side of the road.

With a population of about 181,000, Forsyth is tiny compared to its neighbors. Fulton County, for example, has more than five times the number of residents. And Gwinnett? More than four times as many people as Forsyth.

“In the last year or so, we’ve really seen the tide start to rise again,” Toussaint said. “There’s been \$43 million in new capital investment. And 20 percent of that was international.”

Chamber officials are planning to take the 4,700-mile trip to Germany late this year in hopes of boosting the German presence, he said.

But the best kind of marketing already has been done, experts said. It comes from having a critical mass of German companies here.

“The first one, two, three companies come over and then they talk to colleagues,” said Martin Richenhagen, a German native who heads the German American Chamber of Commerce for the Southern United States, as well as Duluth-based AGCO Corp.

Those word-of-mouth promotions can end up paying more dividends than overseas trade missions that government and business leaders often take to try to lure companies here.

In Forsyth County, the early arrivals came about three decades ago. Munich-based Siemens was joined by American BOA, a subsidiary of a Stutensee, Germany-based firm that makes flexible metal products for auto, petrochemical and other industries. Since then, German companies have been adding locations, bit by bit.

Across the street from one Siemens site is Hansgrohe. The company has been in metro Atlanta for 11 years, making showerheads and kitchen faucets, said CEO Russ Wheeler.

Hansgrohe has manufacturing plants in Europe and Asia, but its 250-worker factory in Forsyth County is strategically positioned, he said.

“We like to manufacture on the continents where we do business,” Wheeler said. “It’s German design and German engineering, but it is American-made.”

Of course, it’s not just Forsyth County. Georgia is host to hundreds of companies that answer to an HQ overseas.

“Atlanta and Georgia have become, in a way, a new melting pot,” Richenhagen said. “We have a very international society here. I think people here are very tolerant.”

Georgia has more than 370 German companies operating more than 560 facilities employing about 23,400 workers, according to the state’s Department of Economic Development. About 2,000 of those employees work in Forsyth County.

An estimated 50,000 German citizens now live in metro Atlanta — and it’s not because the area has a reputation for great Sauerbraten. Metro Atlanta and Georgia have been hosts to corporate expansion for decades, as firms looked for a beachhead in the Southeast. And with the ports — both air and sea — and interstate highways, the area has become a logical place for distribution.

Nationally, Germany is ranked fifth in direct investment in the United States. But in Georgia, Germany is second to the United Kingdom.

Why? “The No. 1 reason is access,” said Jorge Fernandez, vice president of global commerce at the Metro Atlanta Chamber. “It’s not just the flights to Germany on Lufthansa and Delta. There is no other airport that can provide the kind of connections that Atlanta can provide to the United States.”

Mobility is a key selling point to corporate chiefs on the other side of the Atlantic. On this side, business recruiters often dream about attracting German manufacturers.

Georgia’s neighbors spent hundreds of millions each to lure German automakers BMW (South Carolina), Volkswagen (Tennessee) and Mercedes (Alabama). And while the car plants are across the borders, Georgia is increasingly seen as a place to make things, corporate recruiters said.

The growth of German factories in America comes as manufacturing’s share of the U.S. workforce continues to shrink. In the early 1950s, nearly one-third of workers were in manufacturing. Now, it’s about 9 percent. In many ways, that shift was inevitable. Millions of the positions lost were low-wage, low-productivity, low-skill, dead-end jobs in unpleasant conditions.

While Germany is known for its manufacturing prowess, the jobs its companies are bringing to America are not replacing those lost positions. Instead, German factories are typically more capital-intensive, requiring higher-skilled labor.

“One of the cool things about the German companies is that they are really into training,” said Jon Gabrielson, an Atlanta-based business consultant. “I believe they bring a higher caliber of jobs.”

For instance, in the Hansgrohe factory, a towering SHL robotic machine methodically moves a faucet pipe back and forth against a metallic brush, buffing it to a shiny polish. But not far away, two workers are working on another, seemingly similar piece, polishing it by hand.

“Buffing looks easy, but it’s an art,” said Stefan Hammann, vice president of operations at Hansgrohe. “You have the talent for it or you don’t. Robots can do the easier parts, but when you need more dexterity and more movement, then human is better.”

In the future, the most fertile turf will be in the technology, telecommunications and medical information sectors, said Silke Miehke, director of consulting services for the 700-member Southern branch of the German American Chamber of Commerce.

“Do we want this here? Absolutely,” said Fernandez of the Metro Atlanta Chamber. “The trend will continue and we will make sure that it continues.”



Workers at the Siemens plant off Ga. 400 assemble wiring harnesses for use in streetcars, light rail and electric locomotives. Forsyth County is a strong draw for German companies, and Georgia in general is host to hundreds of international employers. BOB ANDRES / BANDRES@AJC.COM

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## LARGEST INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYERS IN FORSYTH COUNTY

Siemens, 1,000 employees (Germany)

American BOA, 281 employees (Germany)

Hansgrohe, 265 employees (Germany)

Solvay Advanced Polymers, 192 employees (Belgium)

Automation Direct Inc., 175 (Japan)

Hoover Precision Products, 150 (Japan)

Chemence, 120 employees (England)

Convergent Media Systems/ Sony, 120 employees (Japan)

Dieffenbacher, 50 employees (Germany)

Trox, 45 employees (Germany)

Source: Cumming-Forsyth County Chamber of Commerce



Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed speaks at a June press conference at Siemens' Ga. 400 plant as Central Atlanta Progress President A.J. Robinson (left) and MARTA CEO Beverly Scott listen. BOB ANDRES / BANDRES@AJC.COM