

The true value of wastewater

Wastewater isn't free, wastewater facilities don't generate any money: what may be true at first glance from a business management perspective might well be viewed differently as soon as the wastewater facility breaks down. Then the economic damage can rapidly reach dizzying heights. So how do you measure the economic value of a wastewater facility?



Sometimes you only know the true value of a machine when it suddenly stops working. That's when the consequential costs become apparent. It's a similar story with wastewater facilities. Executives and plant managers at dairies often struggle to put a figure on the economic value of a wastewater facility. "At first glance, wastewater facilities don't generate any discernible return on investment from a manager's point of view, they just cost money," sums up the engineer, Dr. Reiner Brambach, Director of Sales & Project Planning at EnviroChemie. The added value of smooth-running wastewater disposal becomes clear as soon as the problems arise. "Customers who have gone through this once before can put a much more accurate figure on the value," adds Brambach.

It is not always easy to calculate. Of course, buyers also look at the price and Brambach fully understands this: "It has a lot to do with trust," he says. If several vendors assure them that a process will work, customers sometimes lack the technical knowledge to be able to make a judgement. What else are they supposed to be guided by other than the purchase price? "If two suppliers offer the exact same service, of course you choose the cheaper one," says Ulrich Böhm, Head of the Plant Operation & Service Department at EnviroChemie. The only problem is, the working reality of wastewater facilities is more complex.

Wastewater has to be transported away in tankers

Böhm has come across many situations during the past few years at dairies where an initially low-priced alternative has turned out to be more expensive in retrospect. "It was a case of saving investment costs at the beginning and initially constructing a smaller biological stage, for example." The result: too many pollutants in the wastewater, which they were consequently not allowed to drain into the municipal sewage plant and now has to be transported away by tanker on a daily basis. In one case that Böhm knows about, this is 900 cubic metres per day.

Böhm has observed that customers hope they can hold a vendor liable later if they don't keep their promise of a low price. "But firstly, plant engineering companies can often claim relatively easily that the precise quantity and composition of the wastewater in reality is slightly different to what had previously been stated in the request," says Böhm knowledgeably: "And secondly, even a successful legal case does little to help when production has been at a standstill for days." Böhm therefore communicates quite clearly in his sales pitch that he is not a smooth talker and won't make unreliable promises just to get an order.

Planning is crucial

The simple truth remains: if you plan correctly beforehand, you will save higher costs later. However, this does not necessarily mean you have to invest in the most expensive facility possible. Sometimes the better route can be to seek advice on how to optimise operations: “After all, a facility does mean running costs in addition to the investment,” explains Brambach. “Operational optimisation ideally

leads to less wastewater and therefore lower running costs.” Brambach compares it to a water stain on the living room ceiling, when one tradesman paints over the stain while the other one makes the roof watertight: “For customers though, the most important thing is that we offer them the best solution as close as possible to the causes.”

Brambach and Böhm therefore both stress that they do not regard themselves as just plant salesmen, even if many customers initially perceive EnviroChemie as such. “We focus on solutions,” says Brambach. “We want to bring added value and be a business partner for decades. This way, we earn more than if we just sell a facility.” Böhm recently helped a customer reduce their use of chemicals: previously, a screw compactor, which dewateres sludge, devoured about 400 litres of chemicals per tonne of sludge. “We reduced it to 50 litres with a retrofit,” reports Böhm. He said the customer then asked him if he wasn't doing himself out of business, after all he did sell chemicals too. “But this is exactly why my job is more than that,” emphasises Böhm: “If the customer knows that we will support them on all aspects, they will trust us. That is more beneficial to both parties at the end of the day.”

Being a partner for customers

In the future, Böhm would like to focus even more on total costs, in other words, what a facility including all incidental expenses will cost over 15 years, for instance. “We know that running costs are not inconsiderable from an economic point of view,” he says. However, this approach primarily emphasises looking at the whole picture and supporting customers along the whole value chain from start to finish. “We want to be a partner who customers can rely on to think like them,” confirms Brambach. For example, because the experts at EnviroChemie keep an eye on the market and the future and know about new developments in statutory regulations and technical equipment. “We are familiar with the requirements throughout the dairy industry,” says Brambach.

Thinking like customers, not least so they are sure that there won't be any unexpected breakdowns if at all possible, and that problems will be largely ruled out from the outset. If you make a large total investment you naturally want to be certain that there won't be any problems or delays when it comes to approval. This is one of the reasons that led to ideas like the EnviModul: “A classic example of how we have developed products that are considered from the customer's perspective,” says Böhm. EnviModul is a standard module produced in Germany, which not only facilitates approval but also saves time locally at the construction site, reduces the risk of accidents during construction and finally, allows relatively simple installation. “We don't have to turn up with a huge assembly team either,” explains Böhm. He was thinking along similar lines when they recently received an enquiry about a totally new facility in a new building: “We developed a solution to integrate the fresh water supply into an existing building. This saves the customer money, time and approval expenses.” Nevertheless, it was an expensive investment initially. “But as an overall project, it was the cheaper and longer-term solution.”

What appears to be cheap is expensive in the long run

The initial meetings Brambach has with customers are already consultations: “We systematically research the basics and plan for the long-term on this basis.” At the end of the day, it is a matter of a relationship of trust, as Brambach and Böhm both confirm. And of awareness that EnviroChemie has the whole process chain in sight right from the start, from planning and plant construction to operation and service: “With us, customers have a contact partner and get direct answers that they can use in their decision-making processes,” says Brambach. They can therefore make decisions that not only focus on the superficial costs, but also take account of the full investment in a life cycle from an economic perspective.

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