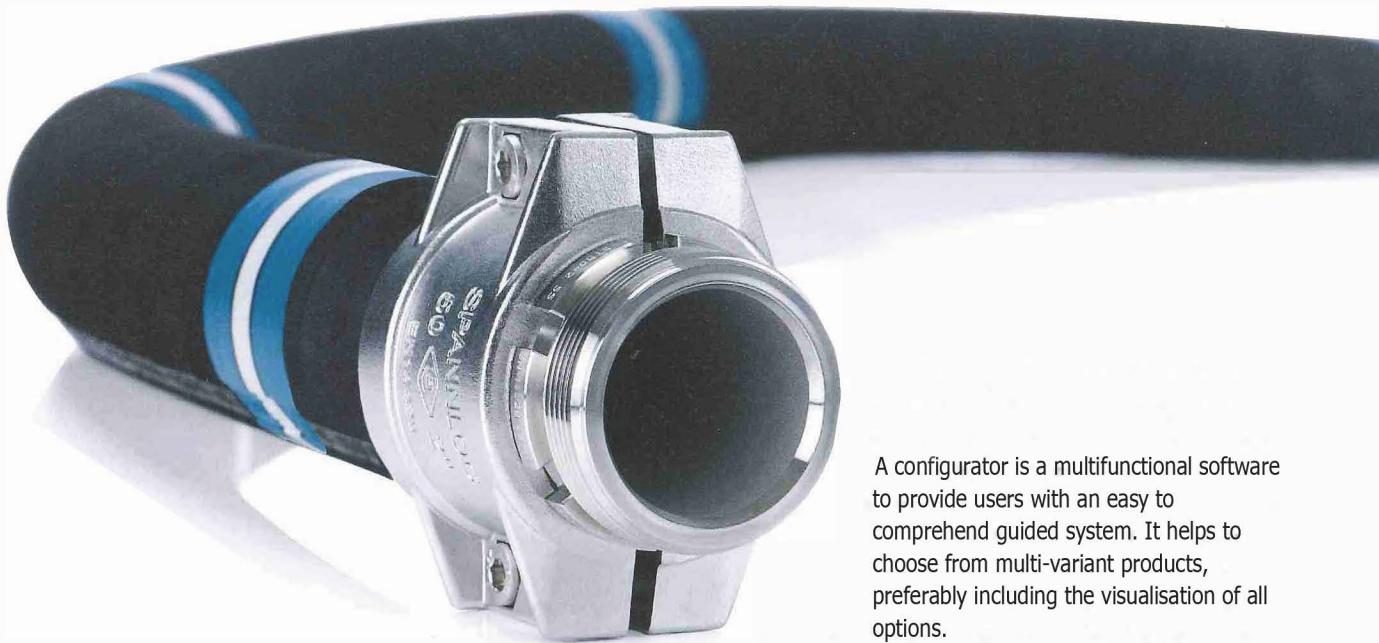


Hose Configurator to simplify the selection of products

Considering the amount of possible variations, it is becoming increasingly difficult for buyers to find a suitable product combination. In the following example, the use of a configurator helps to find the required hose assembly and minimises the number of incorrect orders. Once the RFQ is received, the supplier will check given operation conditions with the chosen product to ensure to deliver the most suitable product.



In the past, when the legendary quote from Henry Ford: "You can have it in any color as long as it's black" has been valid; customers only had a limited choice of products options. Nowadays world is much more colourful and covers almost every conceivable request. Based on a modular system, there are a large number of possible variations to create an individual vehicle, apart from the colour. The same can be said e.g. for hose assemblies. Due to many types and options, the selection of a suitable product combination becomes ever more complex.

Quick and easy choice from a wide variety of options

A long time ago, the consumer goods industry started to offer configurators. Now the industrial (B2B) sector is following suit, and interactive online services are becoming increasingly popular.

A configurator is a multifunctional software to provide users with an easy to comprehend guided system. It helps to choose from multi-variant products, preferably including the visualisation of all options.

For the user, these interactive tools can save a lot of time. Technical details for each option help to get the full picture, combinations not making sense are not shown — and they are fully accessible, 24/7. Hence, well-programmed configurators provide considerable additional value for customers.

Changing the sweater colour in an online shop, visualising a customised car interior – in the consumer sector configurators are widespread. Why is it that the industry sector, including technical wholesalers, offer so few of them? Certainly, they have similar challenges as they offer multiple choices of product types, standards, sizes, materials and accessories.

The simple answer: Creating and maintaining a configurator is a lot of work. It requires a substantial investment of time and money, while user groups are relatively small.

Refuelling specialist Elaflex was not content with the status quo and decided to develop their first online configurator in 2010. It all started with the company's product group who mostly everyone has held in his hands: petrol station nozzles.

Especially for products with many options, online configurators help to choose suitable products and save time

Source Pictures: Elaflex



"The adoption of new information technologies and trends are generally handled conservatively by our company. We will not jump on the bandwagon", says Elaflex marketing manager Karsten Ehlers who has moved decisively forward to this development.

But genuine innovation occasionally is necessary to stay ahead in the market, also in the area of business services. Configurators are a perfect example of this. Meanwhile, configurators for all main product ranges have become available (www.elaflex.de/en/configurators-resistance-charts). Daughter companies and subsidiaries also benefit from the know-how that has been built up.

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Latest versions include interactive tools for the Elaflex daughter companies MannTek (dry couplings) and Dantec (composite hose assemblies). All configurators are continuously updated and improved. New images are created as photorealistic visualisations. These CGI's (Computer Generated Image) offer additional possibilities compared to standard graphics or photos. "We try to make our configurators visually appealing and technically mature", the company states.

Challenged in Selections

In times of lean management, purchasing departments often find it difficult to focus on every detail. The large amount of available information in combination with limited time can lead to a lack of attention. Classical print or online catalogues can clearly summarise basic product types. When it comes to adding up different designs, sizes, materials, accessories and options, the user is easily overwhelmed. This easily leads to incorrect orders or the delivery of unsuitable products.



- » It is hard to imagine, but the hose configurator of Elaflex contains more than 70.000 images for visualization and more than 6 billion (!) possible combinations (including seals, without accessories). This example clearly shows that too many options overwhelm the user. Simplification and guidance in the selection process are needed.

Elaflex' new online tools enable to quickly select and visualise the required product. Products and options are shown with a picture during the selection process, not only at the end. Technical hints and comparisons are available on demand during the process. The basic product choice can be made directly, but this requires basic knowledge. Alternatively, a selection guide incorporating interactive resistance chart can be used. During the step-by step process, the fittings are shown in a so-called 'matrix', where options can be run through on one screen only. This helps for clarity, and it avoids frustration, which may come up if the user is led into a blind alley. The selection ends with a resulting link or PDF to be saved locally, alternatively it is sent as a request for quotation to the supplier.

If merchandise management systems and configurators are not created simultaneously, they often 'do not understand each other' due to missing linking and different logic. Therefore, many configurators are stand-alone-solutions yet. But they are here to stay and must eventually be connected into the ERP. Mr. Ehlers: "We have started to combine data of the configurator with our new Elaflex Product ID App, which allows – after scanning a DMC code – to see the unique digital twin of any Elaflex product in the future. The app enables e.g. to view data sheets, certificates and service information."

In the beginning, Elaflex was not entirely sure how the configurators would resonate among customers. Meanwhile they are being used extensively, so further investment is worthwhile. The company emphasises that in this way it will not mutate into a direct supplier but continue to respect established distribution channels. Premium distributors are invited to integrate the configurators to their website, with their logos and RFQ being directly sent to them.

Crucial points for Hose Configurators

- simple and clear structure for an easy product selection
- Concise presentation of technical hints, only for options and alternatives which makes sense
- Constant maintenance and updates
- Automated creation of photo realistic rendering from CAD files, in layers

Of course, Karsten Ehlers can imagine the world without the new tools. "But we save a lot of time on both sides; without the configurators, sales consultations would take more time and would be more likely to result in wrong orders." Elaflex is convinced that the customer's satisfaction has increased by the new digital service, and in some years configurators will be an essential standard. ■

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