



A PROVEN PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN EQUALS

KION & RAFI: Two global players, one success story

We speak Swabian”: We’ve been working together for 20 years now, always on the lookout for the right solution. Frank Liebming (RAFI, left) and Volker Haspel (KION).

What began 30 years ago on a small scale in Reutlingen has since grown into a mature partnership on an international scale: RAFI now supplies control units for nearly all vehicles in the KION Group. A strong focus on finding solutions and an excellent working relationship have been key to the partnership’s success. This was once again confirmed during a visit to Swabia in the summer of 2026.

The year was 1996. Volker Haspel still remembers his first day on the job very clearly. “I joined a small group that was discussing a project that was already underway. An electrical design engineer was unavailable, so I was able to step in and help. You could say I was thrown in at the deep end,” recalls the father of two, who is now also a grandfather of three.

After studying electrical engineering in Stuttgart, Haspel spent several years in Oberesslingen, where he developed hardware and software for a company. It was there that he first began exploring ideas for a modular concept, ideas he would later refine at his current employer.

His goal was always to create something tangible, something you could actually still see when the work was finished. He found what he was looking for at KION Warehouse Systems, or KWS for short. Over three decades at this highly specialized center of expertise for narrow-aisle trucks and vertical order pickers, he earned himself the nickname “Mr. Order Picker.”

A modular concept creates flexibility

“More than 40 percent of our vehicles involve special solutions developed for individual customers, which we refer to as customized options. That also applies to the software,” Haspel explains. “To avoid starting from scratch every time, the idea was to structure the software modularly so that it could be used for different projects.”

For narrow-aisle solutions in particular, such as those Haspel is responsible for, this provides a clear advantage over competitors: rather than relying on predefined model series, KION uses a modular concept that allows vehicles and products to be configured quickly, efficiently and, above all, flexibly. The range of variations is enormous, but each solution is tailored to the demanding requirements of its particular operating environment: heavy-duty applications, temperatures ranging from –35 to +50 degrees, electromagnetic radiation, dust, cleaning agents, gloves, and vandalism, to name just a few key terms.

Development isn’t something you ever do on your own

Volker Haspel makes this observation while recalling how the partnership with RAFI began. It all started with the EK 11/12 Order Picker. The task was to develop a conventional surface-mounted control panel. The available space was fixed, leaving RAFI with the challenge of creating a technical solution that combined elect-



Making history together: Volker Haspel points to one of the control units developed jointly with RAFI on the Milestone Wall.

ronics, a display, and mechanical components in a single ergonomically designed housing, Haspel recalls. That was 30

years, the partnership has also helped strengthen RAFI’s portfolio in the area of human-machine interfaces. “We’ve le-

„We’ve learned a great deal from each other“

years ago. RAFI now provides KION with everything from a single source.

For Frank Liebming, who has been working with KION as Head of Logistics & Off-Highway Vehicles at RAFI for 20

arned a great deal from each other. Our long-standing partnership began in Reutlingen, and today we supply our products throughout the entire KION Group. We work together productively and responsibly, always with the goal of finding the



A pleasure to operate: every application calls for an individually tailored control unit that can be operated intuitively.

best solution. To me, that is what great teamwork is all about.”

Volker Haspel adds: “In my view, one of the keys to the success of our partnership with RAFI is the trust we place in one another – co-operation in the truest sense of the word. Each side knows and respects the other’s strengths, allowing us to achieve the best possible results together on our joint projects. Another important factor is the reliability that both sides have demonstrated time and again.” He has always found RAFI products to be of the highest caliber, in terms of both design and performance.

Regional differences and customer preferences

Both partners have extensive experience in the implementation of complex projects. KION understands the applications and requirements of its end customers, which makes it possible to precisely define the key specifications. The wide variety of applicable standards also plays an important role, as requirements in Asia and the Americas differ from those in Europe. RAFI can draw on a wealth of interdisciplinary project experience. The challenge extends beyond purely technical implementation to encompass requirements relating to design, tactile qualities, ergonomics, durability and perceived quality.



Pictured: The current MU-M control panel (MU-M stands for ManUp-Modular). From the customer’s perspective, it offers significant improvements over its predecessor model in terms of operating tolerances, ergonomics, joystick, and display.

“There is a trend toward harmonizing standards. Customer preferences are another matter,” Haspel says, explaining the regional differences. “One example is an order picker we developed for the US market. There is no guardrail on the load

was to develop a fully integrated control and display unit. KION benefited from RAFI’s proprietary platforms for joysticks, electronics, control components, and displays. This platform-based approach helps minimize risk, reduce development

„Each side knows and respects the other’s strengths“

side, so the operator remains attached to the vehicle by a fall-protection system at all times. This can affect the appearance of a vehicle – and thus also the appearance and functionality of a control panel.”

RAFI platforms are used at KION

Every modification and every new step KION takes in terms of product development, as well as the associated control systems, are coordinated with RAFI. As Frank Liebminger repeatedly emphasizes, the two companies work together as equals, drawing on their shared wealth of experience. At the start of every new project, the development and functional scope are defined, along with the budget for both development and the finished product.

The same approach was taken with the latest control panel for narrow-aisle forklifts. The particular challenge in this case

costs, and shorten development times, all of which clearly benefit the customer.

From buttons to touch controls – or perhaps even voice recognition?

When he looks to the future, Volker Haspel has a clear vision in mind. “I view future developments as more evolutionary than revolutionary. There are two points of reference here: what customers expect and what we can reliably deliver. Moving away from buttons and toward touch controls is one direction we can go in, but voice recognition is also being considered.” No matter where the journey takes us. From the perspective of the two project partners, it’s clearly heading in one direction: a shared one.

Author and photos: Fred Nemitz