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In the Spotlight

Gual Steel Group: Communication

Mr. Xavier Gual is CEO and founder of Gual Steel Group. The group comprises Gual Steel and Gual Stainless in Spain, Gual Aciers in Morocco and France, and its global brand Gual Inox. The company specialises in stainless steel and prides itself on its intercontinental operations between Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, although Mr. Gual affectionately refers to their headquarter city, Barcelona, as "our town and our house". Xavier spoke candidly with us about the value of authentic connection, the opportunities still to be found in a specialised market, and what lies ahead in a changing world of business.

By Ellie Pritchard

The human factor

Xavier Gual knows that communication is key; coming from a former career as a journalist, Mr. Gual wanted to stress to his enterprise the importance of information sharing in business. "I understood my place in the steel sector would be based on the specialisation of stainless products", and to do that, he felt that the most important contribution he could make to the sector was building up alliances with producers, establishing long term relationships and above all: connecting with people around the world to "go" stainless. "Technical skills are necessary and valuable, but the humanistic skills too. Just to mention one, at Gual we speak up to ten different languages which is invaluable as a company which is globally present. We have regular sales presence in more than 25 countries. We have stable bases in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Portugal, France and Holland, together with our domestic facilities both in Barcelona and Madrid."

It is these humanistic skills that propel Gual Steel forward in the stainless steel sector. Their business model combines their own stock products with the possibility to supply direct from their associated partner mills. This enables them to offer a vast range of stainless steel products in all ranges, grades, and formats, as well as finished products such as brushed, polished, and cut. Mr. Gual explains: "We are sellers, but above all we are consultants for our customers in key areas such as price flows, new products, new challenges and everything that the stainless steel companies need to know to make decisions with main products in their stainless portfolios."

Customer first

When asked what was unique about Gual Steel, Xavier was keen to express the company's consideration for the customer.

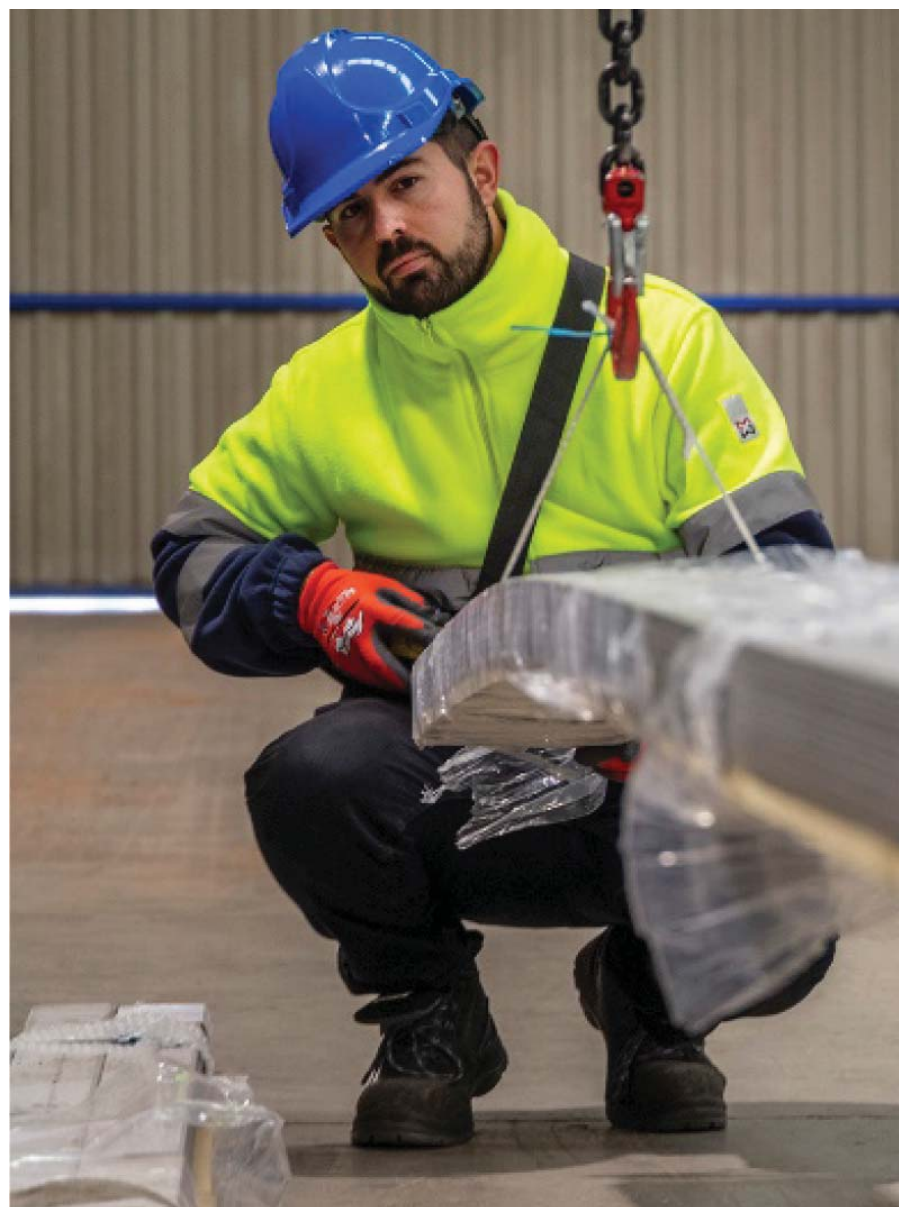
"In this sector, it is common for companies to keep information to themselves; I respect that, but we do things differently. We use our 20 years of experience and knowledge about price evolution, new situations and products, new regulations – we like to share this information with our regular and potential customers because they are the fundamental aspect of our business."

But Gual Steel's partnership with mills and suppliers enables them to offer more than information to their customers. "As stockists ourselves, we provide excellent trading in terms of service, proximity, availability & confidence. This is combined with the best products from our associate mills who provide us with regular supplies, consistent & high-quality standards together with premium prices. We are able to supply directly from the mills so we can guarantee faster production times."

"We also work with a light yet very efficient staff structure to be able to become the most competitive proposal to our customers. We are light to be premium".

Still room for innovation in commodity

Gual Steel's product line is indeed vast and varied; they supply steel in all stainless grades such as austenitic, ferritic, martensitic, and duplex, and in three forms: flat, long, and structural. "In terms of products, we offer two key additional things: Chemical protection to uphold the stain resistance of products, and the possibility to have finishes like



Inside one of Gual Steel's specialised stainless steel warehouses.

mirror-polishing, grinding, finishing, and certain aesthetic finishes. These are extra services that our company can provide as an extra if our associated mills and partners cannot."

They also work with technical partners to develop innovative products like flat tubes, oval tubes, and machines to clean the stainless welding. "Even in commodities we can be very innovative people. For instance, we were one of the top introducers of the 200 series in stainless steel coils and sheets in Europe. We developed in the South of Europe the mass application of structural tubes." Xavier refers to a clear geographical relationship with steel use in certain countries: "We are based in the south of Europe, where you do not see the big tubes and big structural profiles that are very common in Scandinavia and Germany, for example. I noticed myself that here in Spain, only a few individuals

were using these products. We have promoted the use of these big steel tubes and structures in the South – for instance, in the brand new airports in Madrid, Alicante, Bilbao, you will see these products as part of those structures." For Xavier, it was a question of being daring enough to stretch a customer's imagination. "When you go to the market you can either offer the things that a customer is looking for, or you can present things that exist elsewhere and that you know will work well for them. We are very confident in doing that; we offer the basic stuff, but we also try to be pioneering and this has been a success for us."

Challenges: digitalisation and the 'glocal' future

But Xavier has also noticed a change in how global business is done. In part, change has come about as a natural symptom to the Coronavirus pandemic: "Digitali-

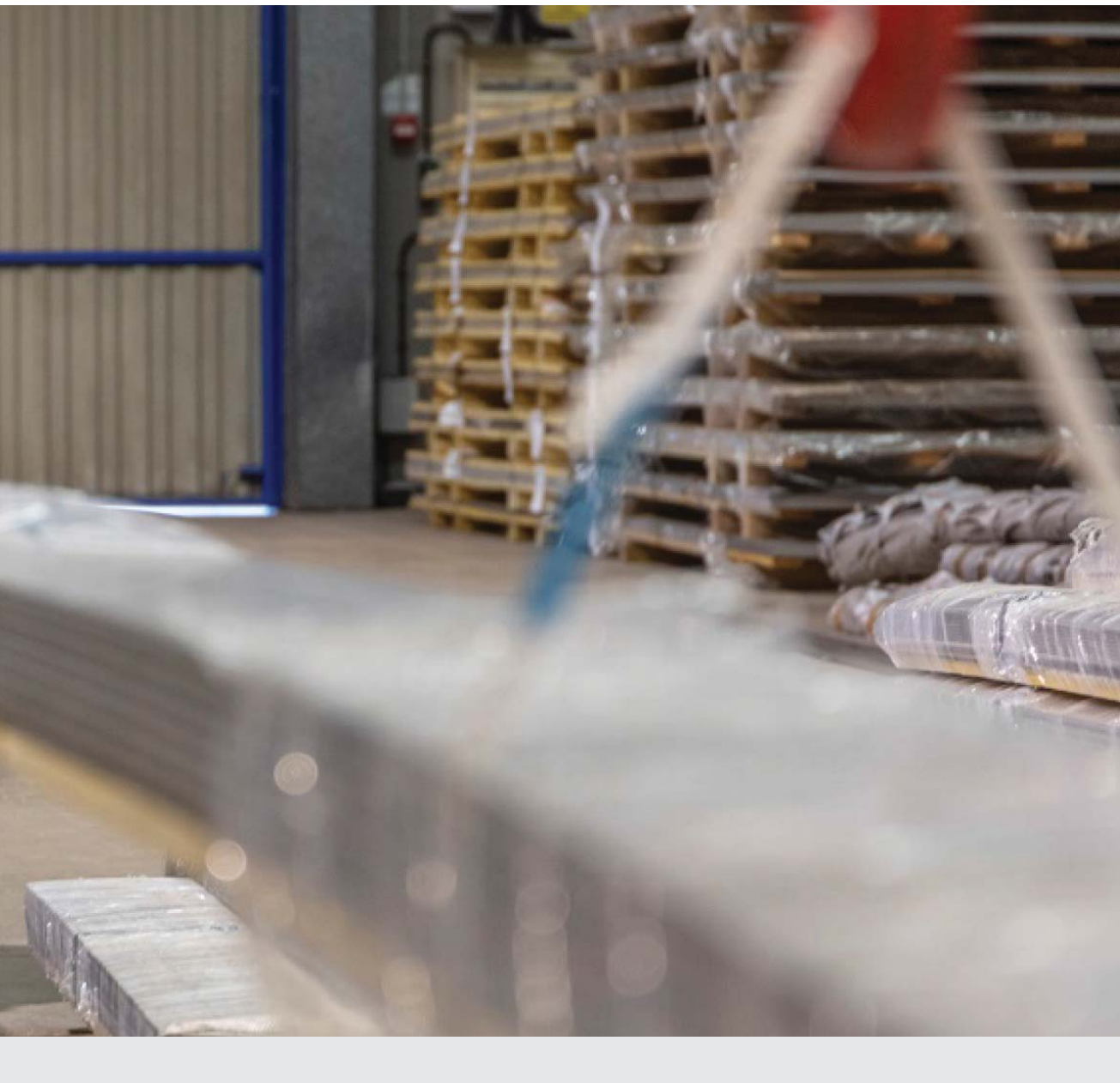


Gual Steel CEO and founder, Mr. Xavier Gual.



TIG Brush weld-cleaning technology developed by Ensitech.

and innovation in a commodity business



The Gual Steel is dedicated, passionate, and experienced in all things stainless steel.

better prices but for sure with better treatment, partnership, and with a cooperative attitude. We have developed several modern challenging products throughout our history. For instance, we pioneered the promotion of the structural tubes and profiles with our former ally Stalatube. Now we are going deeper and further with our new linked producers: Raaj Tubes from Ahmedabad (India) & Binder from Bremen (Germany). Through these international connections, new products enter our portfolio, like ferritic tubes, flat tubes, U-beams and press break tubes."



Gual Steel saw opportunities to introduce structural steel products to projects in southern Europe.

In particular, Xavier refers to a collaboration with Australian company Ensitech to produce its cleaning and electropolishing technology, TIG Brush. The product allows the customer to clean welds in a matter of minutes, bypassing the time-consuming process of weld-cleaning with hazardous chemicals. The collaboration came about as Xavier observed a need in the sector for the cleaning of aesthetic finishes on stainless steel products: "cleanliness is very important in this industry; stainless steel products must be clean for the eyes, but also for hygiene and smooth-running purposes in application. The TIG Brush allows the stainless steel to recover some of its sulphate aspect after machining or welding. It is one of the innovations that we present every year at Stainless Steel World Maastricht".

It would seem, therefore, that Gual Steel's specialisation has allowed them to push the boundaries of their niche sector. It is a passion that has encouraged their customers to explore and rediscover the potentials in stainless steel. As Mr. Gual reflects on the future of his company and its place in a changing business environment, it can be certain that he and his specialised team will be applying the same affinity for innovation and opportunity as they inspire in their customers.

Xavier Gual has visited every Stainless Steel World Conference since the very first, as either visitor or exhibitor. True to form, Xavier and his team will again be present at this year's event in Maastricht from 30th November to 2nd December.

sation is a continuous process; our customers are connected throughout the whole process and our website stores plenty of data and technical information that we offer to the sector".

Like most companies during the pandemic, Gual Steel has had to adapt its networking approach from a strong, southern European preference for in-person meetings and communication to online and virtual connection. "Under normal circumstances, our team is always travelling to meet people in person. The fact that we speak so many languages is an asset to us; we can connect with customers in their home countries, speaking their own language. During the pandemic, our outreach has had to change. For the everyday things, video call and virtual meetings work very well, but in terms of reaching new customers and presenting our company, the loss of in-person connection has been a challenge."

But this is not the only change that Xavier has seen. "In the last 20 years, my company has seen business grow from local to global, and now we are seeing a hybrid of the two: Glocal business.

"When I first started Gual Steel, the term 'export' for a Spanish company meant selling to France and Italy; that is not the case anymore, as the soft borders within Europe mean it has, economically speaking, become like one single country. Since then, export has evolved to mean selling to China, Africa, and India. Nowadays, partly because of new customs regulations between nations such as the EU with the US, we are presented with new challenges. What it means exactly, I don't know, but I am very interested to find out because we are entering a new way of doing business."

In light of Xavier's concerns about the digitalisation that business is now seeing, he also raises questions as to how this will help

the communication in a 'glocalised' sector: "Of course, I will never be against any new system of communication, it will allow us to be more efficient. But I am interested to see how it will help us to connect our customers and partners from different cultures in a way that is better than face-to-face contact".

However, Xavier also anticipates that some things will change for the better in a post-Covid world. "You know, some things still grow in a desert, some new flowers bloom. It is my belief that Covid will accelerate some new business models for companies like Gual Steel; we are people who have experienced globalisation and digitalisation, so we are prepared for the changes to come in this post-Covid world."

Specialisation: a barrier or an opportunity for exploration?

We asked Mr. Gual to discuss some of the highlights his company has experienced since its beginning; "we are a 20/20 project – we have a 20-year journey behind us, selling 20,000 tonnes of stainless per annum".

"But sometimes I wonder about my decision to specialise in stainless; there is the occasional draw to aluminium or carbon steel, for example, and other products." Nevertheless, within this specialisation, Gual Steel has still found opportunities to stay curious.

"We are always in cooperation with the partner mills, we extended our presence in areas of Europe and Africa where they were unknown. We gave to the customers new channels to get their stainless steel materials, perhaps in



Front façade of Gual headquarters near Barcelona.

Overview of Gual Steel's products and services:

All Gual products are available in stainless grades: austenitic, ferritic, martensitic, and also Duplex. Products are offered in the three major groups: flat, long & structural.

- Coils, Strips, Sheets & Blanks
- Full bars (rounds, square, hexagonal, angles) via long-time partnership with Chandan Steel from Mumbai (IN)
- Tubes in all welding options, grades, and formats (round, square & rectangular
- Slitted flat bars (one of our specialities as per an alliance with SIPI Italy & we are leading the market with these profiles)
- Structural tubes and profiles, another of our specialities. Big formats, beams, cut-to-length, all produced grades.

Services:

- Gual Steel is a fully independent advisor to its customers and partners, managing information as an asset for those in its loop.
- Consultancy on market decisions of sales, purchases, market inputs, financial information and more.