Playground equipment maker swings into

German company will use first U.S. office for sales and distribution

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The owner of a German playground equipment company picked Greenville for a small sales and distribution office after he happened on the city last year and liked it, his son said Friday.

Karl Koehler visited a downtown restaurant in August of 2008 to talk with a local resident about the possibility of running a new U.S. office he planned for his Berlin-based company, Berliner Seilfabrik.

As it turned out, Koehler didn't hire the man, but he did hire Greenville, so to speak.

He "just thought it would be a nice place to put the subsidiary," said his son, David Koehler.

That three-person subsidiary has now opened in 4,000 square feet of space along Brookfield Oaks Drive off of Interstate 385 in Mauldin.

The sales and distribution office is the company's first U.S. footprint, though about 25 percent of its business comes from the United States already, David Koehler said. He said the company hopes to add eight employees and be assembling playground equipment in the local office within three to five years.

Berliner Seilfabrik employs 55 people at its plant and headquarters in Berlin.

The company makes three-dimensional net structures called "playscapes" from high-tension steel cables covered with polyester yarn. The structures — which take various forms, such as a ship's rigging or a knight's castle — stimulate cardiovascular activity, according to the company.

Berliner Seilfabrik sells between 600 and 800 of the modules a year, with prices ranging from $30,000 to $300,000, David Koehler said.

The family-owned business served the U.S. market through an outside distributor for 15 years but "decided to do it ourselves because it's such an important market for us," he said.

U.S. customers include Playworld Systems Inc., of Lewisburg, Pa., a playground equipment company, as well as city governments and dealers, David Koehler said.

Berliner Seilfabrik is the 13th Germany-based company with a presence in Greenville, said Tony Smith, a project manager at the Greenville Area Development Corp., Greenville County's economic development organization.

GADC worked with the state Commerce Department's office in Munich, Germany, to recruit Berliner Seilfabrik, Smith said.

Before 1995, Berliner Seilfabrik was owned by the Germany company that supplied steel cable for the Liberty Bridge.