



Setting an agenda for leather

After 38 years in the industry, the president of the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies (IULTCS), Marc Folachier, believes he is entitled to make a few hard-hitting statements.

He feels that, when you look around at even the biggest and most important industry events now, the people you meet are, for the most part, commercial people. "Scientific and technical people go to specialist congresses instead," Mr. Folachier argues, "as well as meetings of their own international professional organisations. This means the three groups—commercial, scientific and technical—are not talking together. We are ignoring each other, and, as a result, the commercial people in the industry have little or no information about their companies' research results; sometimes they don't even know what the boss' strategy is."

Mr. Folachier, who is also chief executive of the French technical centre for leather, leather goods and footwear (CTC), will step down soon. But he does not want to go quietly, preferring to set up a platform to bring the three sections of the industry together as his swan-song, where opinion formers will be able to contribute to a coherent future strategy for the industry as a whole.

The opening opportunity will be a gathering called the International Leather Forum, which is scheduled to take place in Paris, on September 16-17.

It will have four main themes. The first will focus on the research needs of leather professionals today. For Mr. Folachier, the research activity that is taking place at the moment devotes too much time to following fashion trends. He questions the extent to which this can really help the managers of tanneries around the world.

There is an argument that tanners who build up an accurate picture of what the market will need a year in advance—colours, materials, thicknesses, textures and so on—stand a better chance of winning. But the IULTCS president doubts that this genuinely meets the research needs of the people running tanneries today, even though he accepts that the industry must move forward "with an eye on the final consumer". He hopes the Paris forum will establish exactly what those needs are and that research institutions throughout the industry will start responding to them immediately afterwards.

The second of the big themes he wants the event to cover is training, with this as the central question: what are the human resources needs of the leather industry today? He hopes the spirit of co-operation the event will engender will make it easier for university departments, and other institutions that devote themselves to leather, to exchange students and teachers and learn from each other. "There is a time and a place to compete



Marc Folachier president of IULTCS wants the industry to present leather as a valuable and valued resource.

and a time and a place to co-operate," he adds. "These are common issues, and we need positive proposals for dealing with them. If you look at all the research bodies around the world, we are all too small and there is very little we can do alone."

Third on the list of topics is marketing. As things stand, Marc Folachier is sure people (even in Asia) will soon come to regard leather as a commodity. He would like the forum to discuss ways of preventing this mentality from taking root, and of encouraging users of leather—manufacturers and end-consumers—to start regarding it not as a commodity, but as a restricted resource (even if it is renewable). Marketing is the key to this.

He explains: "If a leather sofa is the same price as one covered with textiles, it's destroying the image we've been trying to build up for years for leather. We need new marketing initiatives to encourage big brands to think carefully about where they use leather in their product lines."

He would also like some inside the leather industry to change their thinking. Tanneries, for example, must move away from the mentality that they are producing finished goods—they're not, he insists: they're producing a raw material. Some want nothing to change and say the industry's future is its tradition. "I'm not sure about that," the IULTCS president says. "Other materials have adapted, so why shouldn't we? For example, I know leather will always be a hydrophilic material and that you cannot suddenly make it hydrophobic, but we should still be able to achieve a high level of performance. Waterproof leather is still a joke; washable leather is still a joke."

Finally, he wants the forum to address the related subject of communication in the leather sector. The industry offers what he calls the only historical example of recycling, the important point being that if tanners did not exist hides would cause a huge environmental problem. Sustainable development is of great significance to the consumers of today and they are naturally concerned when pressure groups disseminate ill-considered information criticising the use of leather to suit their particular agendas.

Rather than keep its head down and hope that any fuss blows over quickly, Mr. Folachier believes the industry should build up a library of information so that detailed files are available to all, making it possible for any company to respond immediately with science-based arguments to prove to the public and the mainstream press that leather is a beautiful, natural, renewable material. 🌐