



The automotive industry is a healthy market for tanners at the moment, and the higher up the luxury pyramid we look, the stronger the car companies' commitment to leather seems to be, with iconic English brand Bentley Motors one of the best examples.

Leather lends itself to luxury



The interior of the company's new Mulsanne model uses more leather and more wood than any other.

PHOTOS: BENTLEY MOTORS





Many manufacturing companies continue to produce their goods in Europe and some are doing exceptionally well, for all the gloom that surrounds the European economy. As our Regional Commentary article in this issue makes clear, a commitment to and love of leather are among the secrets of the historically unprecedented levels of success that luxury accessory and automotive companies have enjoyed during this decade so far.

Bentley Motors is certainly a case in point. An iconic luxury brand, Bentley Motors is now under German ownership (part of the Volkswagen Group), having gone through a complex takeover that

lasted from 1998 until 2003. This deal split Bentley from another household name in luxury cars, Rolls-Royce (which acquired Bentley in 1931 and itself became part of the German-owned BMW Group at the same time). However, in keeping with most of the rest of the high-end European automotive sector, Bentley has experienced historical highs in this decade and the good times seem set to continue.

In the first quarter of 2012, global sales increased by 46.6% with 1,759 cars delivered to customers. China emerged as the brand's largest market, with sales in the region up 84.9%, meaning 578 wealthy Chinese consumers took delivery of a new Bentley in the three-month period. Luxury

leather is an important part of the appeal of most Bentley models, and certainly an aspect that Chinese consumers like: cars considerably further down the automotive price charts tend to have leather upholstery in China, even when buyers of the same models in other markets have to make do with synthetic substitutes.

China is the biggest market

There is a measure of irony here, of course. China is by far the biggest producer of lower-cost leather in the world and, as a result, has come to dominate global footwear production, too, with the result that much of the world's leather and many of its leather shoes (like so many





Rolls of finished leather in storage at the Bentley Motors factory in Crewe. The interior of each car consumes between nine and 17 hides, depending on the model.



The company stitches by hand the leather covers on its steering-wheels. Each cover can take two days to create, or even more if the customer wants cross-stitching.

consumer products) have become comparatively cheap over the last decade or more. However, Chinese entrepreneurs who have amassed great wealth on the strength of this consumer products manufacturing boom and want to flaunt what they have got, still mostly turn to European brands to buy their own shoes, accessories and luxury cars.

This is a genuinely global business, though. Bentley Motors says the Americas remain a key market, with sales in the first quarter of 2012 up by 35.6%, with 468 cars delivered. In the Middle East the sales increase was 82.6% (168 cars delivered) and European sales (excluding the two biggest European markets) also enjoyed a 34.4% increase with 207 deliveries over the three months. Sales in the UK and Germany remain stable, with 233 cars and 62 cars delivered respectively.

Bentley cars are made by hand, and not by everyday auto workers but by almost 4,000 people who call themselves craftsmen and women at the company's

factory in Crewe in the north-west of England. Among recent achievements of which they are particularly proud is the new Mulsanne model, a revivification of a classic 1920s Bentley Grand Tourer car, named after a French town close to the Le Mans race-track where early Bentley drivers made their mark in the famous Le Mans 24 Hours Grand Prix of Endurance (taking first place in 1924, 1927, 1928, 1929 and 1930).

For the launch of the new Mulsanne in 2010, the artisans in Crewe created a new "unique and luxurious" interior for the model, with the new cabin representing in the company's own words "the culmination of an extraordinary four-year journey", with "even higher standards of quality and luxury" than usual.

Colour harmony

Key elements of this include colour harmony between the wood and the leather that dominate the interior, but as has been the experience of the interior

design teams of other luxury automotive brands in recent times (most notably Bentley's old stable-mate, Rolls-Royce) the discerning and demanding consumers that make up the brand's customer-base also made it clear that they wanted their leather upholstery to look and smell like leather. This meant avoiding the car-maker's cardinal sin of taking a valued and valuable material like leather and imposing on it the look, feel and sometimes even smell of a cheaper and less valuable synthetic substitute, all for the sake of uniformity. Authenticity and individuality are far more prized at companies such as Bentley. With the smell of the leather in mind, it asked its tanning partners to make sure a "rich, mature leather aroma" remained in the finished leather to evoke this aspect of vintage Bentley cars.

When full production began in 2010, Mulsanne buyers were offered a choice from 24 standard finished leather colours, complemented by a series of "heritage" Bentley colours, with single-tone or duo-



The appeal of luxury. By the end of 2011, the new Mulsanne accounted for 37% of all Bentley sales and the company had begun to refer to the model as its new flagship.

tone options. Customers seeking a sportier mood in the interior often combine two colours. The new model began to reach showrooms in April 2011 and by the end of last year it accounted for around 37% of all sales across the company, prompting Bentley Motors to start referring to it as its new flagship.

Because the Mulsanne is out-of-the-ordinary, stowage compartments include iPod drawer, glovebox and luggage compartment, all of which are leather-lined. The leather cover around the steering-wheel is stitched by hand, which occupies a skilled craftswoman or man for two days per steering-wheel, and even longer if the customer opts for cross-stitching. As at most automotive companies, the leather undergoes extensive colour-fastness and durability tests, but here the tests are often carried out by people of different heights and weights rather than robots. Specially demanding parts of the car interior receive particular attention. For example, Bentley

records the number of stitches per seam in the panelling around the car's air bags, as well as the type of thread, the date the seam was made and the sewing machinist's name, storing the information on a database for a minimum of five years.

Close-up look at leather

A level of knowledge about leather and love of the material like Bentley's clearly takes years to develop, and one person in the company is at the forefront of this, Mike Garnett, universally known as Slim. Slim Garnett, who has worked at Bentley for 35 years, is the company's real leather expert and champion.

On average there are 400 separate pieces of leather trim in each car, with each piece signed by the person who prepared it. Fitting out the interior of one car can take six days. With an average hide usage figure of 64%, a car requires between nine and 17 large A-grade hides, depending on the model. Each hide yields around 46 square-feet of leather. On

delivery to the factory, the first thing Mr Garnett and his team do is subject each hide to a detailed inspection, marking up any obviously unusable sections so that the company's cutting technology will bypass them.

Once cutting is completed, the whole set of 400 pieces undergoes another inspection before being boxed up for operatives in specialist teams called 'trim cells' to put into a car. One cell takes responsibility for the upholstery that goes above the car's waistline, while others work on front and rear seats, doors, fascia, console and the steering-wheel. Slim Garnett explains that applying leather to the steering-wheel is one of the trickiest jobs because it often involves many different panels of hide, and sometimes wood inlays. "Steering-wheels are a good example of the skill involved in the trim cells," he says. "No one else makes them the way we do." And this is why it takes days. It's the opposite of mass production, and Bentley is proud of it. 🌐