



Wheel of fortune

A specialist in leather for steering wheels, Andreas Kindermann, is convinced that increasing affluence in China will lead to a much higher proportion of cars there having leather-covered steering wheels.



Steering wheel in the Mercedes-Benz E-Class Coupé.

CREDIT: DAIMLER AG.

This may not come as a surprise, because it's his core business and his main focus, but Andreas Kindermann, managing director of the Wollsdorf Leather Company in Austria, believes there is something very special about the leather that covers the steering wheel in a high-end motor car. "Steering wheels are special," he says, "so the leather that covers them has to be special too."

Using premium-quality raw material from the Alpine region, Wollsdorf processes approximately 15,000 hides per week and has an output of around 3.5 million square-metres of finished leather per year. Like many automotive tanneries, it usually cuts the leather itself and sends sets to its customers (tier-one suppliers to a long list of star automotive names, including DaimlerChrysler, Bugatti, Ferrari, Jaguar, Aston Martin, Maybach, Audi, BMW, Lamborghini, Maserati, Mercedes and Porsche) for them to fit onto their steering wheels. Around 120,000 sets leave the plant in the town of Wollsdorf each week. "In the last couple of years, we've produced more than 30 million sets," Mr Kindermann continues.

This puts Wollsdorf in a prominent position. By Mr Kindermann's calculation, global car production, depending on the exact year you examine, is around 78 million vehicles per year. In recent times, China has become the largest automotive market in the world, with between 18 million and 19 million per year. Europe is at 18 million, too, with factories in North America making 16 million cars per year these days. Japan, South Korea and many other parts of the world contribute too.

What interests Andreas Kindermann is that, while 65% of the

18 million cars made in Europe have full-grain leather or split on their steering wheels, the corresponding figure for China is only 11%. "This is a trend that is going to change," he says. "As people become more wealthy, their cars and the things they use in their cars will become more upmarket."

So, what is so special about steering wheels that premium-quality leather to cover them is certain to be a part of this change? The Wollsdorf managing director explains: "It's the one thing that you will always have in your hands when you sit in your car. The second thing is, you always see the steering wheel." The idea, clearly, is that the more attractive to touch and attractive to look at this component is, the easier it will be to win over consumers who are thinking of buying the car.

If this has been the case for many years, Wollsdorf has also introduced a series of innovations in recent times, including New Life In Leather, a programme under which it began to offer steering wheel kits in which the weight of the leather is 50% less, without any compromise on durability or on the quality requirements of the automotive companies. At the same time, the company has been working hard to combat perceptions among some in the design world that leather lacks flexibility.

"I met a designer at an event a couple of years ago," Mr Kindermann says, "who told me our product was very nice, but he insisted that he preferred textiles because textiles offered much more design flexibility. That's not true. That's absolutely not true. There is enormous opportunity in design with leather. We can add the design elements that the automotive companies want and still keep the leather completely durable." ☺