



In between presentations—many of the people attending the Hide To High Street conference were young people entering the fashion industry.

Hide to High Street

The University of Northampton hosted the second Hide to High Street conference at the end of October, co-organised by the Institute for Creative Leather Technologies at the University and The Textile Institute and supported by the Worshipful Company of Leathersellers, *World Leather* and Taylor & Francis Group.

In one of the presentations, Dr Kerry Senior of the UK Leather Federation explained how recent global factors have dramatically affected hide prices and quality. The demand for leather has outstripped the availability of hides, he said, resulting in a severe shortage, leading to tanneries being forced to source lower-quality hides from parts of the world where they would not normally venture.

Cattle prices are reported to have risen by 14% in the year 2012-2013, yet ex-abattoir meat prices have only increased by 6%. Therefore, abattoir owners have sought to redress the shortfall by increasing the price of hides. In addition to rises in hide prices, Dr Senior suggested a 30% drop in profit experienced by many tanneries has been influenced by rising fuel prices and export restrictions on hides and part-processed leather from some countries.

Despite the soaring price of hides, high street fashion has been reluctant to accept any significant price rise in leather. He suggested that, other than encouraging more people to eat meat, the only way for profitability to be restored to the leather

industry would be to nurture the value of leather to the consumer by educating them in the advantages that leather represents over synthetic substitutes, and by protecting the name “leather” by restricting terms such as “faux leather”.

He encouraged everyone to complete a recently launched EU consultation on authenticity in labelling for leather. This was reaffirmed later in the day by Usman Khan of Modus Europe, who introduced the study to the audience. The European Commission-led study seeks to gather evidence on the need for a Europe-wide policy on the description of leather products, one that could, later, be applied in other parts of the world too. Mr Khan explained that hard evidence is needed to bring about such changes, including examples of how misleading descriptions have affected business.

Aiming to improve raw hides

A presentation from James Buitelaar of Dovecote Abattoir, which supplies beef to retail group Waitrose, gave details of how the company is seeking to raise the standard of the raw hides it sells by shortening the supply chain, influencing animal husbandry on farms and gathering feedback from those it sells hides to. It is also considering introducing green fleshing of hides prior to sale, which would make processing easier at the tannery and create an additional by-product for the abattoir.

Amy Andrews, who is responsible for leather quality at luxury brand Mulberry, told the audience how having a well-trained workforce can maximise utilisation of leather despite its inherent variability. Mulberry retail staff also pass this message on to customers to make them aware that leather is a natural product and that its variation makes each handbag unique and special. Mulberry has invested heavily in making “Made in the UK” a desirable feature of its products and that investment appears to have paid off since it has recently opened a second factory in Somerset.

The morning session concluded with a history lesson from Andy Bates, who has his own leathercraft studio in Hexham, in the north-east of England. He gave a potted history of how Hexham used to be renowned for leather and glove manufacturing; in the eighteenth century up to 50% of the population of Hexham was employed in either the leather or gloving industry. With the decline in the UK gloving industry, the last tannery in Hexham closed in 1902. However, Mr Bates plans to set up a new tourist venture by recreating a tannery using tanning agents sourced from local woodlands to tan locally sourced hides and skins. He envisages that the leather produced will then be used to manufacture high-quality leathergoods in his own workshop.

Big brands rely on a robust supply chain, said Liam Fassam, lecturer in operations



(Top) Dr Kerry Senior of the UK Leather Federation says the only way for profitability to be restored to the leather industry is to educate consumers about the value of leather.

(Bottom) Andy Bates wants to recreate leather and leathergoods production in Hexham in the north-east of England.

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and supply chain management at the University of Northampton. His presentation explained how terrorism, piracy and bad weather can all have an impact on moving goods from their country of origin into stores. Reportedly, there is €178 billion worth of clothing imported into Europe per day. Time is money and so anything that delays these goods is bad news. Mr Fassam also raised the issue of working conditions in production facilities in developing economies. He highlighted the issue of "hidden" long hours that may go unnoticed owing to the variation in audit systems different brands have in place. He said he thought this problem could be largely addressed by having a universal auditing system.

The leather industry is often little understood by other players in the supply

chain. It is a problem sometimes made worse by misinformation from pressure groups seeking headlines, which has led to unnecessary finger-pointing at an industry that actually does the world a huge environmental favour by using what would otherwise be a waste product from the food industry.

Simon Yarwood, publisher of *World Leather*, explained that this international publication has sought to address this misunderstanding by "blowing the leather industry's trumpet" to make everyone aware of the good practices that do take place in the industry.

The conference was brought to an end with a presentation by Dr Nick Cory of BLC Leather Technology Centre, who explained the importance of testing to ensure that only safe and reliable products find their way into stores and the consequences of not doing so. He illustrated his presentation with several case studies.

The day also brought to the attention of the audience (with a significant number of young people entering the fashion industry) just how complicated the leather supply chain really is and the importance of careful management of that supply chain. ●

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