



Water colours the thinking of OEMs

Automotive brands want to present themselves to consumers as environmentally responsible companies, which means partners all the way along the supply chain, including those involved in producing automotive leather, have had to take creative and, sometimes, as the Quaker Color story shows, pioneering steps to help make this happen.

Automotive original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) talk frequently about using the most environmentally friendly techniques and technologies they can in constructing their vehicles. This includes vehicle interiors, which also means the leather that car brands use in seating, dashboards, door panels, steering wheels and other surfaces.

Fortunately for OEMs, automotive leather producers have known for decades that it is possible to use high-performance coatings on finished leather, derived from water-based pigments, with minimal levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which in the case of many products means completely VOC-free. The specialty chemicals provider, Pennsylvania-based Quaker Color, was one of the pioneers, starting its work on water-based leather finishing in the 1980s.

These days, its automotive leather product range includes an extensive collection of binders, fillers, topcoats and crosslinkers across which the company says it demonstrates a strong commitment to innovation and to developing environmentally friendly, water-based products, but without any compromise on performance or on value for money.

Sales director, Shawn Brown, explains that Quaker Color had been supplying its products to the automotive industry since 1968, but that its connections to the leather industry go back much further. The first member of his family to become involved in the leather sector was his great-grandfather, William Brown, who became a foreman at the McAdoo and Allen tannery in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, in 1919, eventually coming to own the firm in 1949 and running it for the next decade, until his death in 1960, with one of his sons, Harry Brown. When Harry Brown died in a car accident in 1967, the family sold McAdoo and Allen to a holding company but maintained its ties; the current sales director's grandfather, Kenneth Brown Sr, left his job to manage the tannery. This was a significant development. A pigment chemist, Kenneth Brown Sr wasted no time in setting up a new division specialising in dry pigment dispersions in resin bases, calling it Quaker Color. This was in 1968.

A period of growth followed and, by 1972, the Brown family was able to buy back McAdoo and Allen from the holding company, putting it in a strong enough position to take advantage of a development that took place, specifically in automotive leather, in the following decade.

"The 1980s was the beginning of water-based finishing chemicals for automotive leather," Shawn Brown explains. "My father, who by this time was running the tannery, had a strong business relationship with a leather chemicals expert, Nick Kypreos, who had developed a water-based finishing range. He made my father a business proposal, we offered him a space to work in and the work that we do with automotive tanners today really came out of that." And in spite of some resistance, big tanning groups in the US soon realised that a move to water-based pigments was one they had to make owing to pressure from the authorities in several states in the US who were developing new environmental laws at the time to push manufacturing companies away from solvents. The close ties that

Quaker Color was able to form with major automotive tanning groups such as GST AutoLeather, Eagle Ottawa and a number of others as a result of this have endured to this day.

Now, reflecting the extent to which leather production in general, including automotive leather, has become globalised, 70% of Quaker Color's business is overseas, although it still makes everything under one roof in Quakertown, with the exception of the acrylic binders it uses in its aqueous basecoats. Its own onsite laboratory and development plant "replicates a finishing tannery", Shawn Brown says, and uses advanced equipment, including state-of-the-art tools in the laboratory to enable it to carry out a whole series of tests, including abrasion and flex testing for its own purposes and on behalf of customers. Quaker Color was also one of the first places in the whole of North America in which Italian tanning machinery company Gemata installed one of its famous Topstar roller coating machines.

Although it does do a small amount of business with furniture upholstery tanners, too, automotive leather remains the main focus for Quaker Color. Its reputation for supplying environmentally sound pigments with good dispersion, high levels of wet rub and dry rub resistance and the required levels of resistance to water, heat and light, goes beyond the tanners themselves. The long list of OEMs whose suppliers of leather use Quaker finishing products includes GM, Toyota, Ford, BMW, Volkswagen and Nissan. Shawn Brown is confident of being able to continue building strong relationships all along the automotive supply chain in the years ahead.

"We put our values first; if you promise things you cannot deliver, you lose customers' trust," he says. "We want to continue to focus on what we do best, rather than try to be everything to everyone." ☺



Ford, maker of the 2016 Explorer Platinum, is one of the OEMs that appreciates the work Quaker Color has done to produce leather finishing products that are free from VOCs.

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