



In 2014, World Leather launched an ongoing series of essays under the title *Nothing To Hide*, aiming to provide fact-based counter-arguments in the face of the spread of negative information about the industry.

Addressing flawed information of concern to the leather industry

In conjunction with the report in this issue of *World Leather* under the heading "A flawed report of concern to the leather industry", this paper sets down a number points that *World Leather* believes can be used to support leather sector.

It is clear to all involved in the leather sector that an anti-leather agenda began many years ago, and its momentum shows no sign of easing up. The material being used against the sector is often shrill and misrepresentative. Examples are easily found on the internet where inaccurate information is stated as fact. It is often unclear what the real objective of this material is, although some is clearly in support of a vegan anti-meat agenda wrapped up in animal rights and welfare.

These beliefs should be as respected as any other belief, but opinions set down as hard statements should be balanced and supported by facts – not just selected pieces of information taken out of context, or material that is simply untrue. So, what is to be done?

What has WL to offer?

World Leather is not a large organisation, and has limited resources with which to address the continued spread of untruths about the industry it covers. Over and above technical and market information, it is a channel that provides accurate and informative detail for the sector. This can be used for the benefit of all aspects of leather making, including good practices and corporate social responsibility.

Specifically, in the June/July 2009 issue (Volume 22, Number 3), *World Leather* launched its initiative named "Tannery of the Year" for the global industry. The objective was to provide

comprehensive profiles on major tanneries in Africa, The Americas, Asia (excluding China), China itself, and Europe. These reports acknowledge excellence and provide detailed overviews of each operation, examples of corporate social responsibility, and the mode of manufacture, examples of recycling and regeneration of process water, tannery effluent treatment, solid waste treatment, and management.

Between 2009 and 2014, 38 tanneries participated in this ongoing global award programme. For the statistically minded, providing 304 pages of concisely edited information. It includes an estimated 133,000 words, some 650 photographs, more than 450 of which being technical content.

This now provides proof of consistent good practice over a period of six years. The way that the format is presented is clear and enables technical comparisons to be made between different types of leather manufacture, and leather made in different parts of the world. This compendium of good practice by tanneries is in the process of being expanded, and by February/March 2016 the objective is to have increased the global coverage to 48 tanneries.

This vast amount of information is fully available through the *World Leather* technical library on leatherbiz.com, and can be used by representative organisations or individuals to support the leather sector or any company's use of leather in its finished products.



The Tannery of the Year programme has provided evidence, in the form of thousands of words and hundreds of photographs, of excellence in the global leather industry.

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A further *World Leather* initiative commenced in February/March 2014 entitled “*Nothing to hide*”. This was in response to misinformation or in some cases disinformation on the internet concerning the sector. In this issue of *World Leather*, essay number 10 in the series is presented to provide clear and truthful information associated with the leather sector. Essays presented in April-May 2015 and June-July 2015 specifically addressed chrome-related issues to counter misinformation and misrepresentation of the risk presented by hexavalent chromium, as set down in the flawed report produced by Friends of the Earth concerning the leather industry. After publication in *World Leather*, all of these essays are carried on the dedicated website, nothing-to-hide.org, and become freely available to any organisation or individual as a true overview of a responsible industry.

The value of representative organisations

World Leather magazine is providing secure information that can give factual support for an industry that is being undermined. It will continue to provide support and information to assist tanners as events and requirements change.

However, the magazine can only provide the information; accredited organisations that represent the leather sector are the people who must represent the sector's interests. Expertise, data and detailed information are available to state a case from within the sector, and this includes these valuable detailed sources.

Knowledge and understanding through education

Based on the content of the Friends of the Earth report, we can see that there is a growing need for leather technologists. These are people who not only understand the scientific details needed for leather manufacture, but also know how to make leather. They understand the technicalities of in-house recycling and regeneration, energy efficiencies, wastewater treatment and solid waste recycling, conversion into new products and responsible disposal. These are the people who can bring together the areas covered by leather scientists, technicians, chemical engineers and environmentalists, who themselves – although important – often do not understand the finesse of making leather. Leather technologists have broad knowledge, and there is a strong need for more of these expertly qualified people for the future viability of the industry.

An understanding of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a key factor for the future viability of any organisation. There are prime examples of this subject in the leather sector, and many examples are given in the Tannery of the Year reports. As a subject of vital importance, CSR needs to be a significant component within leather-related study courses and training.

There is a need for a better understanding of the industry by those individuals who influence purchases and selection of materials for consumer goods where leather is suited for use. This is not

only in regard to the aesthetic requirements and physical properties of the leather and costings, but an awareness and regard for the corporate social responsibilities of a source of supply. This includes the working conditions, good technical practice, responsible treatment of labour, all environmental considerations and local communities, and credible sourcing of raw materials. This is quite a different situation to the need to train leather technologists, but would enable good and secure choice for the provision of leather for the consumer market.

These requirements can only be provided through carefully managed education and training. The needs of leather manufacturers and downstream participants are different, but there are areas where investment in training for both the tanning sector and the downstream providers is essential.

What should individual tanneries do?

A major problem for the sector is that there are a vast number of tanneries globally. There is strong competition among these tanneries, and the market is largely fragmented. There is no common voice or representation for the entire leather industry, such as that provided by the Wool sector. It is clear that there are three areas where individual tanners can exert influence:

1) INACCURATE INFORMATION FROM PRESSURE GROUPS

Damaging and inaccurate information is being published in a similar way to that featured in the “I” newspaper (see A flawed report of concern to the leather industry, page 31) in many countries around the world and on the internet. In these situations, tanners should forward the incorrect information to a representative organisation for the leather industry, centre of commerce or appropriate government department. The counter-case for leather should be firmly stated, with reference to literature as necessary for validation. Fair and swift response should be expected from the representative body.

2) INACCURATE OR NON-REPRESENTATIVE INFORMATION FROM WITHIN THE LEATHER SECTOR

Regrettably damaging and technically incorrect information has arisen from within the leather sector. Papers have been published in magazines purporting to serve the leather sector, especially



including sources in India and Pakistan, that take a local bad situation and expand the issues into generalised statements of malpractice. Individual tanners who run good operations should correspond with these publications, stating a case against the article and expect that these corrections should be published. *World Leather* magazine has rejected negative papers of this type submitted for possible publication and has responded to their authors explaining in detail why they have been rejected, and highlighting the potential damage that might be caused to the industry as a whole.

3] OPEN THE DOORS

There are many examples where tanneries open the doors to people who have little knowledge of the leather industry. And it is appreciated that even where the tanners have the highest standards concerning health and safety issues it is inevitable that taking groups or parties of people around the plant will raise new issues and incur some costs.

However, a knowledge of what actually takes place within leather manufacture, the quality of the plant, and responsibilities to both the workforce and environment can go a long way to generate better understanding, education and goodwill by the public at large. Where doors are closed there is always room for misunderstanding and concerns, but understanding based on an open-door policy can only serve the best interests of the whole leather sector long term.

Room for excellence

The leather sector has a good track record for technical, social and environmental advancement and responsibility. It is true that there are individual tanneries in some parts of the world that fall short of these high standards, but this is far from the general global picture.

In the case of any bad practice, responsible tanners do not object to the use of legislation to force those performing poorly to change or even go out of business. Where bad practice occurs, authorities should do much more to enforce improvement or closure using existing legislation. Perhaps tanners – who pay their way through direct and indirect taxation and investments – should increase the pressure on reluctant authorities either directly or via their representative organisations. If tanners are causing damage, then they should be made to



Undergraduate students at the UK's Institute for Creative Leather Technologies (ICLT) after a 2015 series of tutorials from leather chemicals manufacturer Trumpler. Investment in education is also important to prepare new generations of leather technologists.

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cease production.

And surely there is room for accreditation of approved tanners – a system that identifies excellence and excludes any tanner that participates in malpractice.

Summary

New visions as part of a sustainable future are evolving: there is merit in many of these aspirations and these should be taken into consideration. In the Friends of the Earth report an example is given, but unfortunately it suffers from loaded statements that place unjustified burdens on the leather sector. It is a low-quality report.

In general, it can be said that the industry is very responsible, and where issues arise is swift to adjust to changing demands and values. But although this positive information is known within the leather sector it is not generally known in the outside world. Accordingly, damage is being done.

There is a way forward, and credible information is available in the form of substantial reports created by *World Leather* in conjunction with many tanners and individuals in the leather sector.

There are other specialised organisations in the sector that can provide detailed data and represent the interests of the sector that is so critical at this time. Just as organisations with an anti-leather agenda use the internet to promote their interests, then so should representative organisations – local,

national and international – coordinate and use professional services to fairly represent the sector.

In addition, there is a need for more leather professionals in the sector with comprehensive knowledge as leather technologists. These people are needed because they have knowledge spanning all the aspects of leather manufacture and are capable of guiding the industry in increasingly complex times. Also, there is an advantage in having more well trained people in the downstream sectors who can select materials on a basis that reflects good practice in all of the aspects of corporate social responsibility. This all involves investment by individual companies and organisations in accredited sources of top-end education.

In short, investment is needed to provide accurate and factual support for the sector. This can be provided if individual tanners support representative organisations. Every tanner needs to become actively involved in repudiating misinformation by using and supporting representative organisations and demonstrating a fact-based case for the leather sector.

In the *World Leather* article “A flawed report of concern to the leather industry”, the question was raised as to how much the international leather industry has spent on promoting its environmental credentials. This question could also be expanded to include education. These costs are high, but the future is firmly in the hands of the tanners. 🌐