



Stahl celebrates 60 years in Waalwijk with special automotive events

Leather chemicals manufacturer Stahl held a series of events at the end of September to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of moving to its current headquarters just outside Waalwijk in the Netherlands.

Chemicals manufacturer Stahl started out in Peabody, Massachusetts, a town with lots of leather-making heritage, but moved its global headquarters to Peabody's Dutch counterpart, Waalwijk, exactly 60 years ago. Founder, Harry Stahl, wanted to be closer to his big leather customers in Europe, so the move made sense. To mark the anniversary, the company held a series of celebratory events across several days in Waalwijk in late September involving customers, suppliers, employees and people from the local area.

At a customer event on September 24, the company opened a new centre of excellence for the automotive industry at the Waalwijk site and hosted a series of discussions and presentations about the future of the automotive industry, with Professor Ferdinand Dudenhöffer from the university of Duisburg-Essen in Germany, a world expert in automotive research, as one of the main speakers. He told the audience that automotive groups sold a collective total of 74 million cars across the world in 2014 in a global market that is becoming more and more competitive. In the face of fierce competition among original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), he said flexibility is more important now than economies of scale.

Among the comments of note that Professor Dudenhöffer made at the event, was one in which he said that the interior materials that automotive companies use, including leather, are going to have to play a part in meeting car users' increasing demands for communication and entertainment inside their vehicles. He said car interior suppliers are going to have to make materials that have smartphone-like touchscreen surfaces. "All car manufacturers are thinking about touchscreen technology," he said. "I think that in about 20 years' time, a car interior will be a giant touchscreen."



A vintage Rolls-Royce on display outside Stahl's new automotive centre of excellence. The old ways worked well, but Stahl wants automotive tanners to embrace new technologies now.

CREDIT: WTP

Lighter and more decorative interiors

Founder and creative director of Waalwijk-based footwear innovation and education institute SLEM, Nicoline van Enter, also spoke at the event, focusing on social trends that she believes will help shape what cars will look like in the future. But on the subject of touchscreen functionality in automotive interiors, she agreed this trend will definitely affect leather too. "It's already happening with wearable technology," she said, "and it's work my students are already heavily engaged in."

Another of the points she made seems obvious but may, nevertheless, have

escaped the attention of many automotive tanners until now: much of the projected growth in car sales will come in developing economies with hotter climates than most of Europe and North America. "This means interiors in lighter colours will become more popular," Ms van Enter said, "and, in keeping with consumers' tastes in these markets, car interiors will also include more ostentation. For example, I recently received a lift from a company chief executive I was visiting in Asia and, inside his car, it was all Swarovski. Where he comes from, people are more decorative than they are here."



The Volkswagen “debacle” and the leather industry

An expert on automotive market research, Dr Axel Sprenger, said at the event that he thinks the best way for the automotive leather industry to secure a successful future for itself is to redouble its efforts to make the leather that goes into cars as natural as possible. Dr Sprenger, a former Mercedes engineer, is now senior director for the European business of US-based automotive market research firm JD Power.

Dr Sprenger said that if manufacturers of synthetic materials continue to improve in their efforts to imitate leather and tanners continue to supply their automotive customers with finished leathers that are more and more difficult to distinguish from cheaper synthetic substitutes, it is likely automotive companies and consumers will question the need to have leather in car interiors at all. He made the point that, if people in coming years find themselves spending more time in their cars, the quality of the materials in their car interiors will have greater importance than it does today. “At the moment, people only look closely at interior materials at the time of purchase, but this will change.”

Examining the question in more depth with *World Leather* afterwards, Axel Sprenger explained: “What makes sense for the leather industry is to move away from this trend to make leather look and feel more and more like polyurethane or vinyl. Tanners have to make their leathers look more natural, more like leather.”

He warned that it could take a substantial amount of time for wider consumer tastes to adjust to more natural leathers, with defects and all, in their car interiors but said something similar had happened also with the wood some automotive companies use in dashboards and other parts of the interior. “It’s even possible the Volkswagen debacle of recent days [over the widely publicised scandal involving deception over emissions results] could help. Companies are going to have to become more transparent and offer greater authenticity,” he added.

CEO calls on tanners to embrace new technology

Stahl’s new centre of excellence for automotive in Waalwijk is equipped with up-to-date machinery, including its own coating, lacquering and printing line and two squeak-and-rattle testing machines



Stahl chief executive, Huub van Beijeren (left), in conversation with Professor Ferdinand Dudenhöffer from the university of Duisburg-Essen at the company's special anniversary celebration in Waalwijk.

CREDIT: WTP



SLEM founder, Nicoline van Enter, says car interiors in the future will be lighter in colour and more decorative, to suit consumer tastes in developing markets.

CREDIT: MESSE DÜSSELDORF



The centre of excellence in Waalwijk is equipped with up-to-date machinery.

CREDIT: WTP

for seating and trim materials. Stefan Buri, the chemicals manufacturer’s global marketing director for automotive, said he was confident the new centre would help Stahl develop new technologies and products for its automotive clients. Examples he gave included technologies to help meet environmental demands, to reduce the weight of car interiors by using leather that is lighter in weight or solutions for scuff marks or stains on seating materials.

At the end of an event, Stahl’s chief executive, Huub van Beijeren, told *World Leather* he wanted the companies that buy leather to hear directly about

the innovations his company is working on. “We want automotive companies and luxury brands to find out about what we are doing and that’s what we hope to achieve with this new centre of excellence,” he said.

Mr van Beijeren said tanners will be able to benefit from visiting the centre, too, but he said he sometimes has the impression tanners are reticent about taking on new technologies. “What they’ve always done for their automotive customers works,” he said, “so why change? They fear that if they change, the new technology may not work as well as the old.”