



Earlier this year leather chemicals manufacturer Lanxess held a seminar to inform and educate brands about the effect of restricted substance lists on the leather industry. CREDIT: LANXESS

Sensible or senseless standards - that is the question

The world is changing and the requirements of consumers change accordingly, not just for the product itself, which is dictated by 'big fashion' anyway, but also for the materials that go into the product and how it is made. We often talk about what is generally referred to in a wider sense as corporate social responsibility (CSR). This encompasses traceability, animal welfare, proper treatment of workers, environmental impact and safety of the product. With regards to leather, this is obviously very much related to the chemicals that are used in tannage, finishing and production.

To be clear, the great majority of consumers, as emerged from an Italian study commissioned by UNIC several years ago, are most concerned about what their purchase looks like (that is, is it fashionable?) and how much it costs. Only after that do people consider CSR. The CSR issue is primarily pushed by groups like Greenpeace and PETA. Even though they are generally a pain, they can, if taken with caution, act as a catalyst to doing things better:

The environment in the mid-late sixties was going to hell and governments were pushed to issue legislation to force

industries to get their act together. That got us the effluent treatment plants, which contribute to a cleaner environment. This is an ongoing process that will never end, whatever we do. We invent new products, which take us into unexplored (environmental and health) territories, and legislation then catches up and imposes new and stricter rules. As with the laws of physics, what you put in one day will come out in some form. What you sow, one day you will reap. That's why we have to look ahead.

The focus group par excellence for a CSR exercise is one made up of tanneries. They deal with practically all the issues that are on the table such as traceability, environmental considerations, treatment of workers and use of chemicals. They also deal indirectly with animal welfare. Tanners are responsible players, in spite of everything that is being thrown at their reputation by ignorant people who have their own agenda for saving all the animals in the world and saving the world from that evil polluting tanning industry. Each person and each group have their own priorities.

Impelled by pressure groups, and by a desire to safeguard



their reputations, brands are now demanding that tanneries trace their supply line and show from where they bought their raw materials. They are also required to state which chemicals they use for their processes, which prohibits the use of certain ones. This ignores the fact that the EU has implemented the REACH regulation for safeguarding the environment and protecting public health. The brands are becoming therefore 'holier than thou' and tend to overreact. In fact, each brand submits to their suppliers a list of demands that covers the above issues. This is absolutely fine in principle. Such an attitude actually contributes to making tanneries more virtuous partners, particularly in certain countries. With these demands, tanneries are now surpassing the legal requirements in most developed countries.

Tanners are therefore complaining that the demands placed on them are unreasonable and compiled by people who have no idea what they are talking about. On top of that, each brand has its own list of requirements. This means that a tannery that sells to five brands has five different lists of demands it has to conform to. This is a recipe not just for chaos but also for misunderstanding and commercial hazards. A brand wish list or 'Brishlist' that is interpreted by the issuer in one way and by the producer in another, could easily lead to controversy. It could be extremely costly if a tannery has to pay indemnity for shoes or bags in the shop window that are, for one reason or another, judged not to conform to certain demands.

We are dealing mainly with social issues, environmental problems and public health concerns. I wonder why there can't be an objective professional body set up by brands and tanneries that devises a standard or benchmark to which tanneries and their processes have to conform.

When I started writing this article, Lanxess had recently organised a seminar that dealt with restricted substance lists, most of which feature in many of the above lists. *World Leather* reported on this seminar in January, saying that more than 50 delegates attended and heard talks from senior representatives of the Lanxess leather business unit. Presentations covered issues such as how the global leather supply chain works, what technologies are available for the preservation of hides and finished leather and the framework that exists to make sure those technologies are safe for consumers, workers and the environment.

Lanxess' Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier – VP for leather industry relations – said at the event that one of his concerns is that some brand representatives seem to think they can "cut and paste" what they know about textiles and use that knowledge for leather too. To allow them to continue to do this unchecked could result in a major problem for the leather industry, he added.

I allow myself to add that brands first need to be educated on how to compile their lists. These must be directly related to the chemicals, their quantities and the concentration used in the leather industry, taking into account that in order to make leather, like it or not, chemicals are essential. Lists that are long and incoherent clearly indicate that the issuer has little or no knowledge or understanding of leather chemistry and are not in the brand's interest either. The chemicals used for the transformation of hides and skins into leather are

different from one tannery to another, although essentially the major ingredients are the same. It is similar to the pharmaceutical industry where there are many products to treat a headache, composed of various ingredients, but with the same active base. There is a firm platform from which the industry can work.

The Lanxess seminar is in my view a great step towards the education of the brands in leather chemistry. The seminar gave important proof to the brands of how much work behind the scenes is being done by responsible chemical suppliers before products become available for commercial use. The seminar gave the brands an overview of risk assessments, scientific studies and industry mapping carried out in the field of biocides and explained to them the rationale behind the products. The feedback Lanxess received from the brands was that this additional information was very valuable and much appreciated.

I would suggest that Lanxess, having already taken the lead, should expand on this and try to guide the brands objectively to a realistically workable standard list. As Dr Tegtmeier put it: "This is not only about Lanxess but about promoting leather as an industry, particularly to the brands."

The chemical industry is in an excellent position and can take a leading role because it has a much better knowledge of restricted or dangerous substances than anybody else. It has the financial means, the knowledge, the research facilities and the conscience to develop and update the benchmarks for brands' wishlists. Together with tanneries and brands, a standard could and should be introduced to eliminate the present chaos and unprofessional approach to what is a serious issue.

Cohesion across the industry around a standardised list would also serve as an active promotion of the industry to the general public. It would also potentially take a lot of wind out of the sails of anti-leather action groups by dispelling often senseless headline-catching claims, against which the industry has little or no means to argue owing to a lack of a unified base from which to make our voices heard.

So my call to the chemical industry as a whole, the brands and the tanneries is to unite and work on the future of the most beautiful natural product - leather. 🌍



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