



Change is coming, whether we like it or not

Leather chemicals company Stahl believes that the automotive industry is about to experience more change than it has done in 100 years, with an enhanced importance for car interiors as one of the most significant developments.

Last year, leather chemicals manufacturer Stahl chose to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the move to its current headquarters in Waalwijk in the Netherlands by opening of a new centre of excellence for the automotive industry.

At an event to celebrate the opening of the new facility, Stahl chief executive, Huub van Beijeren, said 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 also said at the time that tanners are able to benefit from visiting the centre, too, but he added that 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."

Under one roof

Nine months on, Stahl's marketing director for the automotive segment, Stefan Buri, says the centre of excellence, with all of his company's technologies (including prototypes) on display under one roof certainly offers possibilities to "our direct customers" (tanners) and also to automotive companies (OEMs) and their suppliers. Mr Buri links the centre to Stahl Campus, a knowledge-sharing initiative that the leather chemicals company launched in 2014 to help "develop expertise" throughout the leather value chain. It consists mainly of a series of training courses that the company offers at its premises around the world or at a customer's premises.

In the last 12 months, Stefan Buri explains, 180 visitors from 30 different organisations have engaged with the programme, taking part in at least one course. Strong interest from candidates in the Americas led the company to open a second Stahl Campus in León in Mexico in April this year and it has plans to open a third in Guangzhou before the end of 2016. And, of course, the campus in Waalwijk now has the extra attraction of the automotive centre of excellence. "This is all part of making sure we have the resources in place to fulfil the vision we have of encouraging learning, sharing information and encouraging dialogue all along the supply chain," Mr Buri says.



The Σtos concept car from Rinspeed, an example of what lies ahead for automotive in the near future. CREDIT: RINSPEED

Eye-opener

On his chief executive's point about tanners' tentativeness, he says that, having been in his current role for around 18 months, it looks clear to him that major change is taking place in the automotive supply chain. One of the implications is that, whether they like it or not, producers of automotive leather are likely to be part of that change. He offers his company's new partnership with Swiss organisation Rinspeed as an example. Rinspeed describes itself as a think-tank and mobility lab for the automotive industry. Earlier this year, it unveiled a design concept for the Σtos, a self-driving car with an interior that features glow-in-the-dark leather, tanned using Stahl's chrome-free EasyWhite Tan system.

"The global automotive industry is about to change," Mr Buri continues, "and the interior is going to be the heart of the car. In the conversations we have with OEMs and their interior builders, the one common theme is the need to embrace change. Over a very short period of time, the car industry is about to change more than it has in the last 100 years. We see it as an opportunity and we want to pull our partners towards engaging in the change. The centre of excellence and the Stahl Campus offer a framework and the dialogues are starting to happen. Step by step, we can make the supply chain strong."

He refers to the experience of working with Rinspeed as "an eye-opener", and says he came away from this and a number of other recent discussions with the firm view that "Silicon Valley is coming closer", even to cautious, traditional, conservative industries such as tanning. "We want to embrace this change with our partners from the leather industry," he concludes. "But in such an interesting and complex supply chain as leather's, for innovation to happen, partners need to talk and trust each other more. Our belief is that initiatives such as our centre of excellence and Stahl Campus can play an important role in that." ★