

Lanxess Seminar 2017

For the second year running, leather chemicals manufacturer Lanxess hosted a seminar devoted to the leather industry at its headquarters in Cologne in early 2017. This follow-up to an event it organised a year earlier attracted 85 delegates, mostly from finished product brands, a substantial increase compared to the number who attended in 2016.

In organising a second annual leather seminar for representatives of finished product brands, leather chemicals manufacturer Lanxess set out themes that included the reasons for using chrome-tanning methods as well as broader questions concerning the image of leather in the eyes of brands and consumers.

At the start of the seminar, the head of the host company's leather business unit, Luis López Remón, welcomed delegates and said he was looking forward to some informed discussion. He commented: "Leather is a very special substrate because it adds value; articles made from leather fetch a higher price. Cars offer the best example. Most people already know that car manufacturers achieve only a small margin from selling a car, perhaps €200 or €300. It's when they add extras such as leather in the interior that they make money."

His colleague Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier, vice-president with responsibility for leather industry relations at Lanxess and the

principal organiser of the event, agreed, saying: "Collagen, the material we use to make leather, is the result of hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. Leather's properties, including its breathability, abrasion-resistance and high elasticity, are all based on the complex structure of collagen." He then went on to give an account of the difference it made to the leather industry when, in 1857, Dr FL Knapp discovered chrome-tanning. What had taken three or four months with vegetable-based tannins could now be done overnight with chrome. "What an impact," Dr Tegtmeier said, and he added that, even with many brands considering a switch from chrome-tanned to veg-tanned leather, five or ten years from now, most of the leather in the world will still be tanned using chrome salts.

Taking this thought further, Lanxess's Dr Volker Rabe argued that there are good reasons why chrome is now the best known tanning agent. It's not a rare element, but the twenty-first most abundant on earth. Almost all of our chrome

*Lanxess headquarters in Cologne was the venue for the seminar.
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Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier told the audience that five or ten years from now, most leather will still be chrome-tanned.



Luis López Remón said leather's ability to add value to finished products makes it "a very special substrate".



Most of the 85 delegates at the 2017 Lanxess Seminar were representing major leathersgoods, footwear and automotive brands.

resources, 95%, go into steel production; only 2% goes into making leather chemicals. While trivalent chromium is 10,000 times more common than its hexavalent counterpart, Dr Rabe explained, chrome VI is present in the environment and there are circumstances in which chrome III will oxidise to chrome VI. "Based on current science, though, chrome VI should present no risk to workers or to consumers," he insisted. There was more on this particular topic on day two of the seminar.

Dietrich Tegtmeier continued by offering brand representatives in the room an outline of the globalised leather supply chain, starting with an annual raw material supply of 300 million hides and skins from cattle, sheep and goats from all parts of the world. Leather is an ideal sector for developing countries to build up at the start of their journey towards industrialisation, he said, because they usually have local raw material to hand and a willing workforce; it therefore helps bring people out of poverty, and Dr Tegtmeier quoted a figure saying that one job in leather manufacture can generate as many as 30 jobs in downstream processes, including shoe and garment production.

Next, he then touched on sustainability concerns, which he said represent "a difficult situation" with plenty of room for improvement, although he believes the leather industry deserves more credit for environmental responsibility than it usually receives. And it's in the interest of tanners to come as close to 'zero waste' as they can, he insisted, because only one-third of a hide can produce grain leather. "The rest is waste," Dr Tegtmeier said. "But if you use as much of the waste as possible, you can add value to 99% of the hide." He added that he regards it as unfair for campaign groups and brands to include "upstream calculations" for land and water use, for example, in leather's carbon footprint. Attributing to finished leather a share of the water that falls on pasture-land as rain, for instance, is like including in a wooden chair's carbon footprint a proportion of the water a tree absorbs while it's growing. "That would be ridiculous," the Lanxess vice-president observed, "and it's the same for leather: most of the carbon footprint comes from farms, and leather has no influence on it."

In other opening-day presentations, delegates received

practical information on a variety of tanning topics. Lanxess's Andreas Weckmann addressed the use of biocides in leather preservation and pointed out that from March this year articles treated with biocides that are not on a new European Union approved list "will not be permitted to come onto the market". His colleague, Dr Martin Kleban, spoke about how workplace regulations and risks are changing the industry, although this is far from a new thing, he pointed out. He explained that, while there are several hundred chemicals in the typical tannery storage area, sodium sulfide for dehairing is "still the one with the highest toxicity profile, still the one that causes the most accidents, including fatal accidents". It is possible to handle all of these products safely, he added, if you manage them in the right way.

Presentations on the second day included a talk on the "rules" tanners must follow during production to prevent chrome VI from forming in the finished leather with, once again, the host company's Dr Volker Rabe taking up this subject, followed by details from Dr Jean-Claude Cannot of new studies that French research and testing organisation CTC has carried out in this area. Dr Cannot explained that he and his colleagues have tried out their ideas on real hides processed in their organisation's own tannery and concluded that any tanner following best practice today can prevent chrome VI from forming.

The audience of 85 footwear, automotive and leathersgoods brand representatives then heard short presentations relating to consumers' perceptions of leather and work going on in the global industry to improve those perceptions. The speakers were tanner Thomas Heinen, the head of UNIDO's leather division, Ivan Kral, Lanxess's Dr Martin Kleban and Andreas Tepest from footwear group Deichmann.

A lively panel discussion, with a wide range of questions from the audience, brought the event to a conclusion.

Afterwards, Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier said he was very happy with the way the event had gone, particularly that so many brand representatives had accepted the invitation to attend and that so many people in the room had taken part in discussions. "The immediate feedback I've had has been very positive," he said. 🌐