



Saddleback Leather donates almost all of its earnings to charitable causes and has set up a welfare scheme and nursery at its manufacturing facilities in Mexico.

People before profit

Pouring from the pages of the Tannery of the Year reports are heart-warming stories of the workers helped with medical bills, children given free nursery places or supplies bought for the local schools. This is because those selected for the programme represent a caring side of business that is often overlooked, but one that *World Leather* believes is important to highlight. Saddleback Leather, a US-based bag company that manufactures in Mexico, is one such business. It offers free childcare to the more than 300 plus workers in its Leon-based factory, and is

currently raising money to fund supplies for the local school. "A lot of our workers' children have been in our daycare for a couple of years now and are reaching elementary school age and we'd love to keep providing schooling for them," says Jonathan Story Munson, Saddleback's events manager.

Offcuts, surplus stock and one-offs are auctioned through the Saddleback Facebook page, with the proceeds going to the children. The ultimate aim of the business is that all profits from making the bags goes into "growing the factory and growing the people".

A simple sketch

The Saddleback story will be well-known to fans (and there are many – one of its videos has had half a million hits) as amiable owner Dave Munson has made himself part of the branding. Uploading blogs, photos and videos has made him into a "real person, rather than Saddleback Leather Corp," he says. "It makes it a very personal thing, so customers start to trust you."

The idea for the company was born when Mr Munson was working as a volunteer English teacher in Mexico in the late 1990s and was searching for a bag to hold his books. He stumbled upon an old



All bags are designed to have as few seams as possible, to keep them hardwearing.

ALL CREDITS: SADDLEBACK LEATHER



man in a tiny leather workshop and asked whether he could create the bag he had envisaged from a sketch. "He said 'si' and I said 'bueno', and that's how it all started."

On returning to the US, he found he was inundated with enquires. "People crossed the street to ask about it and came out of their offices when I walked by their windows," he says, which made him realise there was a demand, if he could fill it. He spent the next couple of years travelling between Mexico and the States, selling bags out of the back of his truck, while looking for reliable suppliers and saving up for samples to be made. He persuaded his father to help with orders and bookkeeping in 2003 and business began to pick up. Shortly after, he met his now wife, Suzette, had two children and continued his passion for travelling around the world. By 2007 he was in the position to hire family members and take on business coaching to help steer the company.

Mexican roots

Central to the company's success is the leather district around Leon and the wider state of Guanajuato in central Mexico. The area is home to around 500 tanneries (although many of these are small) and the state is responsible for more than half of Mexico's leather and footwear export by volume and for 70% of the total by value.

The raw skins are brought in from the US and turned into wet blue by Curtec in Leon. Mr Munson praises the skill and care that goes into each process. "This place is constantly checking," he says. "The tannery has an Italian water filtration area. The cheap tanneries don't have these, they just dump stuff out of the drums straight into the river. The tanning process is not easy. This first part is foundational to great leather."

From there the skins are transported 10km to Lefarc, a family-run business that has a stake in Curtec and won Highly Commended in the global Tannery of the Year 2013 competition. The skins are tumbled for eight to 10 hours with water soluble dyes, tannin and refined oils. Mr Munson points out that cheaper leathers could be achieved by reducing the time in the drums, but cutting corners leads to



The waterbag from Saddleback's hair-on collection is made using one large hide.

CREDIT: SADDLEBACK LEATHER

inferior leather. "We want to work with other companies that put quality above all else," he tells *World Leather*. "We have chosen tanneries that are committed to doing things the right way, not necessarily the cheap or fast way. Our tannery partners welcome inspections and quality control checks as well as sponsoring programmes to recycle their water."

Gorgeous scars

Getting high quality leather is essential to the company, which selects the toughest and most durable skins. A change of policy on its tenth anniversary in 2013 means the leather is now more likely to feature insect bites, stretch marks or maybe even a brand. "Their character tells the story of a prior life and brings joy to those who recognise the beauty," said Mr Munson at the time. "The bags are now often harder to build because we carefully select where the brands go and where the scars are placed. I'm not guaranteeing that all bags will have

a rancher's brand or a gorgeous scar, but you can always cross your fingers."

Saddleback specialises in messenger bags, briefcases, duffel bags, travel bags and other accessories, in black, tobacco (light brown), chestnut (reddish brown) and coffee (dark brown) leather. They come with a 100-year guarantee and a promise that "they will fight over it when you're dead!"

Proud workforce

Leon is also home to Saddleback's workforce in a factory set-up called Old Mexico Manufacturing, where applicants take a CVI (Core Values Assessment) to help identify skill sets, strengths and weaknesses. "We can determine which applicants have a strong attention to detail and therefore might be good in quality control or stitching, etc," Mr Munson tells us.

"One of the most important parts of our quality is people. And not just any people – people who really enjoy what they do. We hire high quality people, we pay them more so they don't leave and we don't have to retrain more people, but also because it's right."

In 2015 Saddleback partnered with non-profit organisation Centro Noé to help workers' children with a state accredited English programme, along with art classes and sports. They have two learning centres in Morelia where the high school graduation rate is 27%. The graduation rate for those who have gone through Centro NOE's programme jumps to 87%.

"Before I started Saddleback, I spent a lot of time in the Guanajuato area. I got to see the needs of the community and the problems my local friends faced," says Mr Munson. "As we grew as a company, it was one of our earliest priorities to make Old Mexico Manufacturing a place that honours our employees as whole people."

Purified drinking water is provided for workers, along with subsidised lunches. Every employee's birthday is celebrated, along with Mexican holidays and a Valentine's Day party to celebrate love - employees are given free taxi rides to and from the party. Marriage counselling and life-skill classes are offered as well as English

lessons. Old Mexico Manufacturing is equipped with a resident nurse and medical care is free for all employees and their families. Dentists also visit annually to complete complimentary dental procedures.

After working with the team in Mexico for a few years, it became apparent that there was excess work capacity at the factory, so a side businesses was set up, with Dave as a president, to provide other brands with access to the facilities. "We have a wonderful facility with wonderful people, so it made business sense to reach out to other like-minded companies who might need help on the manufacturing side," he explains.

The reciprocal relationship between the US and Mexico, the ease of trade and the passage between the countries of the raw skins and the finished product is integral to the smooth operation of the company. However, as the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) is being renegotiated it is unclear how a changed

deal might affect trade. But Mr Munson does not let this worry him. "We try not to focus on politics but business as usual," he tells us. "We love our partners in Mexico and the US and hope to see both sides of the border thrive."

Humble existence

One of the big factors that makes Saddleback stand out from competitors is that it gives most of its profit away, mainly to Christian ministries around the world, or feeds it back into employee benefits. The family live a relatively humble existence given that the company is reportedly a multimillion dollar concern. Home is a series of tents in Texas sourced from the East African Canvas Company, the continent leaving such a strong impression on them during visits to Rwanda and Tanzania.

Suzette Munson founded leathergoods and accessories company Love 41 after one such trip in 2010, and donates all

profits to a childcare centre she established in Rwanda. The couple also sponsor 16 orphans there, many of whom were victims of that country's genocide, and facilitate others to sponsor children of their own.

The hope for the business is that it will grow so it will enable the family to help more children and "people in need", and that they can educate customers and the wider public about quality materials and product. "My hope is that the more you know about quality and craftsmanship, the less you'll get taken for a ride and feel stupid and the more you'll insist on quality in all you buy," Mr Munson concludes. "Our bags might be a little bit heavier than others but that's just the price of owning quality. They also don't have zips and magnets and other conveniences because that's because they are built to last. There are a lot of trade-offs we must decide on in life and this is one of them. Quality isn't always convenient, but it sure is worth it." 🌐



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