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Leather means leather

The Global Leather Coordinating Committee wants there to be greater protection for the term 'leather' in the face of brands and material suppliers using it to describe synthetic substitutes.

The Global Leather Coordinating Committee (GLCC), the umbrella body that brings together representatives of the International Council of Hide, Skins and Leather Traders Associations (ICHSLTA), the International Council of Tanners (ICT) and the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies (IULTCS), has issued a call for greater protection of the term 'leather'. In response to what it calls "the spread of false and misleading descriptions abusing the term", the GLCC wants governments around the world to establish legal protection for it, saying that its misuse can "deceive and confuse consumers".

At its most recent meeting in Shanghai during this autumn's All China Leather Exhibition, the GLCC concluded that there has been a "proliferation" in the use of the term 'leather' to describe "materials that are either synthetic substitutes made from fossil-fuel derivatives or developed from substrates such as residues from vineyards, the pineapple industry or mushrooms".

It also noted that, at the third World Leather Congress in Shanghai just before the exhibition, Stephen Jeske, senior vice-president of GST AutoLeather, had raised concerns about "the use of fantasy names by car companies for materials that mimic leather", adding that there is "a total lack of transparency" about the true composition of these materials. Mr Jeske also said that confusion for the consumer

is exacerbated at retail level by "ill-informed sales staff who cannot adequately explain to the customer what these fantasy names mean".

The GLCC insisted that 'leather' can only be used to refer to the hide or skin of an animal that has been tanned to a sufficient stage to prevent putrefaction, and where the natural fibrous collagen structure can be clearly identified. Naturally, production of this material is limited by the supply of a by-product of the meat and dairy sectors.

"Leather's good reputation is increasingly diminished by unscrupulous traders," GLCC concluded, "affecting public perception of leather and causing significant damage in the market, both to legitimate producers and consumers of leather products around the world."

Unhelpful claims

Sportswear brand Nike is currently under scrutiny from the leather industry following the unveiling of what it calls a new "super material" made from discarded leather scraps. The problem lies not in the material itself, but in Nike's assertion that it looks and feels like premium leather. The leather scrap is collected from the floor of tanneries and combined with synthetic fibres and fabrics. This material then goes through a finishing process before being put on a roll to cut. Nike says it uses at least 50% recycled leather fibres.



The company's vice president of footwear innovation, Tony Bignell, claims this material "completely mimics" the pigmented, full-grain leathers it has previously used in athletic footwear. Despite this claim, what Nike has 'created' is essentially bonded leather, which is widely acknowledged to be inferior to real leather in terms of quality and strength.

Nike has also made a series of unhelpful claims regarding the environmental impact of this synthetic material. This includes insisting that it has a carbon footprint that is 80% lower than the process of manufacturing leather. *World Leather* immediately questioned this figure and asked Nike to explain how it arrived at it. In response, the brand said that the figure was calculated by two consultancy firms, Oakdene Hollins and PRé Consultants. No workings have been provided to support the figure of 80%.

Essay 12 in *World Leather's* Nothing to Hide series offers more detail about the work the Cattle Model Working Group did to calculate the carbon footprint that should be attributed to leather. In brief, it concluded that on average, 88% of the environmental impact of dairy cattle should go to milk and only 12% to meat. An animal's entry into the food chain at the slaughterhouse, therefore, brings only 12% of the upstream carbon footprint with it. At the abattoir, an economic model inevitably takes over, attributing 3.5% to the hide, but it means leather's share of the upstream carbon footprint, according to the Cattle Model Working Group's submission, is just over 0.4%.

This is a complicated issue, but if we know it, the consultants Nike employed must know it. Oakdene Hollins appears to have no previous participation in a project involving leather but PRé Consultants took part in a technical capacity in the project the European Commission launched in 2013 to establish an environmental footprint methodology. This resulted in an ongoing pilot exercise involving a wide range of industries, including leather. We can only assume that if PRé Consultants explained the above methodology to Nike during its work on this new material, the brand decided to use a different basis for calculating that it has an 80% lower carbon footprint than leather.

Nike's claims regarding the performance of the material are also potentially damaging. These include that it is five times

more durable than "traditional leather". In response to *World Leather's* questions, the company said this was determined following tests by inspection agency SGS, which tested the bonded material against full-grain leather. Both were abraded over 5,000 cycles and checked for weight loss and visual wear. Although Nike was able to verify that its new material had better abrasion resistance than leather, it has inaccurately equated this with durability, when in reality these are two different performance characteristics. Increased abrasion resistance does not necessarily mean enhanced durability.

Nike's announcement immediately rang alarm bells for many in the leather industry. The concern is that the brand is marketing a cheaper, inferior material as a new, improved one. The fact that it has also been presented as being more environmentally responsible than leather has further compounded the uneasiness with which it has been met, especially at a time when leather is already facing a tough battle to regain its place as an important material in the footwear industry.

Inaccurate descriptions

Certain synthetic material suppliers also have a case to answer when it comes to the misuse of the term 'leather'. One such example is US biotech company Modern Meadow, which has been working for a number of years to create what it is calling "innovative new leather materials". Having initially focused its research on developing synthetic meat products, the company turned its attention to producing a synthetic material that it believes can be an alternative to leather for brands and manufacturers.

It has created this material using a proprietary "biofabrication" technique. Andras Forgacs, founder of Modern Meadow, has explained that this involves using collagen protein and "other essential building blocks" found in animal skin to "recreate aspects of traditional leather, including suppleness and breathability". The company employs DNA editing tools to engineer specialised collagen-producing yeast cells. Chief technology officer Davie Williamson claims this method can produce "collagen that rivals any collagen currently on the market". What's more, he

Nike's Flyleather material consists of discarded leather scraps combined with synthetic fibres.

CREDIT: NIKE





says this can be done at a competitive cost and on an industrial scale.

Modern Meadow has used the collagen to assemble a material that it says can be used to make finished consumer products. It markets this material under the brand name Zoa, which is described on the company's website as "the first biofabricated leather material brand". What they are neglecting in labelling it in this manner is that the material does not meet the GLCC's definition of what can be referred to as 'leather'. As a result, it is inaccurate for Modern Meadow to use the term 'leather' to describe the material.

The company has already unveiled the first product to feature Zoa, a t-shirt that also uses more conventional textiles. Samples of the raw material are due to go on display at a pop-up exhibition that the company has arranged in Manhattan, New York. It says it is partnering with "world-class brands across luxury and consumer goods categories" to make products using Zoa, adding some of these will come to market in 2018.

Legislation required

At present, Nike's bonded leather material and Modern Meadow's "biofabricated" synthetic material are only available in the US. Should they choose to extend their reach to countries such as Brazil or China, they would fall foul of regulations that only permit the use of the word 'leather' for materials made from hides. This definition excludes materials made from shredded or bonded fibres as they are deemed misleading to consumers; as such, Nike's new material could not be marketed as leather.

Brazil's Centre for the Brazilian Tanning Industry (CICB) has been working hard in recent years to enforce the country's 'Leather Law' or 'Lei do Couro'. It forbids material or finished product manufacturers, brands and retailers from using the term 'leather' for any type of synthetic material. It has been on the statue books in Brazil.

The CICB has carried out a series of 'blitzes' across Brazil to ensure the law is not being violated. This has principally involved visiting retail locations in some of the country's largest cities to check that they are labelling products

Modern Meadow's Zoa material is derived from biofabricated collagen. The US company has so far displayed samples of the material and unveiled a T-shirt that combines it with more conventional textiles.

CREDIT: MODERN MEADOW

correctly. In some cases, inaccurate labelling of synthetic materials, which have included terms like 'organic leather', 'synthetic leather' and 'technological leather', is immediately corrected, often by simply crossing out the word 'leather' on product tags.

The GLCC has acknowledged the "excellent campaigns" developed in Brazil by the CICB, and encouraged increased use of China's Genuine Leather Mark. It has also commended the efforts of Leather Industries of America (LIA) in the revision of the US Leather Guides as well as those of COTANCE in the European Union for harmonisation of national leather labelling rules.

The umbrella body believes that only legislation on mandatory authenticity labelling can curb "false and misleading descriptions" and says these measures will also protect brands against unfair competition and empower consumers. Specifically, it has called on the European Union to lead the way with "an exemplary regulation on leather authenticity" for its 28 member states. This would support the work the European footwear industry has already done to ensure consumers in the EU can see at a glance what the uppers, linings and soles of shoes are made from. It encouraged the US government to seek "regulatory cooperation" with the EU. *World Leather* understands that COTANCE worked closely with GLCC in preparing its statement on this subject.

"Keeping the description of leather articles free from abuse enhances the value of the product and justifies the premium price asked and paid for leather against synthetics or fakes," GLCC says. "Persuasion rather than injunctions plays a crucial role in this area. Brands increasingly understand the business interest of transparency and authenticity in enhancing customer loyalty."

It insists that there is room in the market for all materials, provided they are marketed and labelled correctly. ☉