



CREDIT: GALLERY SHOES

Time for change

The director of the UK Leather Federation, Dr Kerry Senior, argues that the leather industry must work globally to convince brands and consumers to shift away from synthetics and back to leather. His view is that a far more “active and aggressive approach” is required.

The leather industry is under pressure. It is being attacked by agenda groups, such as People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), smearing leather with lies and misinformation. It is in competition with a growing number of synthetic materials, including imitation materials made from mushrooms, that brand themselves as an alternative to, but somehow the same as, leather (and always with better performance and environmental characteristics). The use of misleading descriptions and trade names, such as eco-leather, Flyleather and Tec-Leather, mean that the battle to maintain the integrity of the definition of leather is slowly being lost. The image of tanning among those outside the industry is either vague or poor, with the whole industry being benchmarked against the very worst practices in places like Hazaribagh and Kanpur.

Once, the response of the industry was to do nothing. Now, various committees churn out carefully-constructed position statements, which languish unread on rarely visited websites. Industry experts preach to the converted at conferences and seminars, and give forth in opinion pieces in the industry press. Trade bodies petition

regional, national and supranational governments on behalf of their members and write stern letters to the editors of publications that have maligned leather, and are for the most part, ignored. In all, very little changes and the image of leather and leather manufacturing becomes more confused and eroded in the minds of customers and consumers.

Arguably, the only meaningful development in recent years, that has produced positive change in the perception of industry, has been the Leather Working Group. However, this is a brand-driven initiative that does not have the best interests of the industry as its core motive. It has been imposed on the industry and, for all the positives that have come from it in terms of driving up standards in the tanneries involved, is largely unknown outside the industry and the brands that insist on it.

The tragedy here is that much of the work done is good and the opinions expressed are informed and correct. Much has been done to address the issues of the industry, including the recent development of the Tannery of the Future project, that provides tanners with a free self-audit process for sustainability. Various documents that the



International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies (IULTCS) has published, particularly the IUE, its environment commission, demonstrate the industry's commitment to constant improvement and have been pivotal in persuading the World Bank to adopt pragmatic standards for tanners it is supporting in Venezuela. Furthermore, the industry-wide position statements on animal welfare and so on, produced by the International Council of Tanners (ICT), show that the industry recognises and seeks to resolve the issues it is confronted with. Yet, no capital in promoting the virtues of leather outside of the industry has been made from this work, while the likes of Stella McCartney espouse the virtues of plastic 'alter-nappa' ('another nappa') to more than a million followers on Twitter.

Independent verification

A fine example of this is the apparent indifference to the latest and most significant development with regard to the environmental footprint of leather. Thanks to the efforts of COTANCE and UNIC, the EU pilot project to develop the Product Environmental Footprint Category Rules (PEFCR) for leather, was successfully completed. This is a feat that was beyond the hugely well funded meat sector. For the first time, the leather industry has a verified, consistent model to accurately model its environmental impact.

The conflation of the footprint of livestock-rearing and leather manufacture, has long been used to attack the leather industry resulting sometimes in fantastical claims made for the amount of water used to make a pair of leather shoes or the impact of leather on climate change. These new rules (the PEFCR) have, with independent verification, eliminated almost all of the impact of livestock-rearing on the footprint of leather, a significant achievement. While, the PEFCR do not allow for a comparative evaluation of the impact of leather and synthetics on this basis, they will allow tanners to identify 'hotspots' in their production and work towards increasing the sustainability of their product. Even accepting that this is a very new development, there seems to be no rush to exploit it.

Leather is a fantastic product. Not only is it beautiful and versatile, it is long-lasting and repairable, virtues central to reducing the environmental impact of any material. When made properly, it is sustainable, environmentally benign and the only viable solution to a massive waste problem for the meat industry. The leather industry has a great story to tell, yet we are failing to reach the right audience.

A new approach is required in promoting leather, separately targeting brands and consumers. For the brands, we need to continue working to clarify the supply chain and provide confidence in the safety and reputational integrity of leather. Some of the necessary information exists, but more initiatives are required, such as benchmarking the lifecycle analysis (LCA) of leather against synthetic alternatives. Smit & Zoon's 'Product Passport' is a fine example of the kind of thing that should be done, providing transparent information on the performance and environmental characteristics of the company's chemicals.

The consumer is more difficult. There are informed consumers who will make purchasing decisions based on an understanding of the provenance of materials and so on, but the majority of consumers do not know or do not care about the issues that concern the brands, such as chemicals, animal welfare, and so on. We have to make



*Animal rights protesters outside an H&M store in Toronto in June 2018.
CREDIT: SHAWN GOLDBERG/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM*

these consumers want to buy leather again. This means not only ensuring that they are made aware of the positive benefits of using leather but also that they are re-engaged with the desirability of leather and want it in the products that they buy.

Happy families

We also have to recognise that the industry is not one happy family. There are tanning regions around the world that are dragging down the image of the global industry, with long-standing issues around damage to the environment, abuse of workers and harm to the local populations. The issues are largely political, with a lack of will or interest in those countries to deal with the problems. Nor are they unique to the leather industry but they are routinely used to attack leather.

The leather industry can reasonably claim that it cannot influence the situation in these countries, but, by refusing to buy products or materials, buyers and consumers of leather and leather products can. We should not be afraid to name and shame them or to distance ourselves from them, to ensure that the distinction between the good practice in much of the world and these regions is well understood by customers and consumers of leather.

The leather industry can lift people in deprived regions out



Finished leather at the Andrew Muirhead tannery in Glasgow. We should not be afraid to shout about the good things being done by the best leather manufacturers in the world. CREDIT: SCOTTISH LEATHER GROUP

of poverty and, where possible, we should support this, including the activities by organisations such as UNIDO. Developing industries in poorer parts of the world must be given time and support to reach acceptable levels of practice. However, the industry cannot appear to condone practices that abuse people and the environment for profit, and we must ask the question, how long do we wait for these tanners to catch up with the rest of the world? It was very interesting to hear at the 2018 UK Society of Leather Technologists and Chemists (SLTC) conference, two representatives of major leather chemical companies discuss how the point will come when they will not supply these tanners any more.

Superior and sustainable

We should not be afraid to shout about the good things being done by the best leather manufacturers in the world. Admittedly, the complexities of global supply chains mean that we are not entirely separated from issues in the rest of the world, but Europe in particular is the home to some of the best tanneries in the world, with tanners in the UK, Austria and Germany (and others) using state of the art technology to make the best leather in the most sustainable way possible. This should be promoted far and wide. Brands are under pressure to increase transparency in their supply chains and some are starting to reveal the identity of their suppliers. If consumers understand where leather that conforms to the best standards comes from, there will be pressure on the brands to use that leather.

If what needs to be addressed is challenging, then the solution will be even more so. A comprehensive programme of promotion will require significant funding and manpower. The difficulty here is that the various organisations for leather are largely comprised of individuals who are fully engaged with other work and give their time voluntarily to

support the industry, while the sector associations are mostly small and have very limited resources. There is also a lack of connected thinking and coordination in activities and communications.

Far more active

What does exist is a common understanding that action is needed. This will require a strategy that exploits the good work done by the various leather organisations and takes it out of our domain to the rest of the world. We cannot simply create stores of resources and hope that the world will come to us. Research is needed to provide scientifically sound rebuttals of the spurious claims made about the environmental impacts of leather production.

Much of this work should be done by the national trade associations, engaging at a local level. However, there is also a need for global-level activity, engaging with brands, the press and consumers, which will require either a new approach to collaboration across the industry or even a dedicated body. Most importantly, a far more active and aggressive approach to promoting leather is needed, one that reaches outside our familiar channels to the most important audience, the consumers, and places leather back in their line of sight. This will not happen if we continue as we are, but it is something that we can make happen if we choose. 🌐



The leather industry has to make consumers aware of the positive benefits of using leather and re-engaged with the desirability of leather and to want it in the products that they buy. CREDIT: ILM OFFENBACH