



Quality is the new mantra

After spending a great deal of time condemning NGOs and other agencies, I want to change the subject. However, I will not stop trying to destroy a useless development system that produces no benefits for the leather industry in Africa. I will continue to attack this system head-on and I would appreciate a helping hand from leather sector trade organisations, the major fair organisers and, above all, the industry itself.

Just look at the example of Rwanda, which has received tens of millions of dollars in development money, while at the same time spending funds sponsoring a football club in the English Premier League. Development money that finishes up in the pockets of millionaire football players while the poor people in the country are left in the cold; can it get crazier than that?

Questions to answer

What is the future of the leather industry? Who will survive the continuous changes? Who will be able to adapt? How will negative publicity and non-compliance with environmental requirements influence the development of our industry?

The leather industry will survive until some clever scientist comes up with an alternative use for this specific by-product of the meat industry. This seems very far away, and may never happen at all. Vegetarians and vegans will have little influence on meat consumption as they will only be able to reach the minority that considers meat consumption to be unhealthy or unethical. The majority will pay no attention to their efforts and will continue to eat meat.

With the supply of skins and hides continuing to flow and with no Einstein on the horizon to find an alternative, the leather industry seems to have a guaranteed future. But how do we work towards that future? What can we do to make it a bright and sustainable future that demonstrates respect for natural resources and the environment? This would go some

way to taking the wind out of the sails of the anti-leather campaign groups.

In my view, the answer is easy: quality. Quality is more than a nice tannage, a nice selection and a good appearance. Quality goes deeper. It looks at the whole value chain, starting at the top with animal welfare and proper treatment of animals, certified by the veterinary system that already has to certify the health of slaughter animals. Although these upstream stages influence how people view the leather industry, they are not the responsibility of our industry. This has been confirmed by the success COTANCE has had before the European Commission, during which it has shown that the leather industry bears very little of the total upstream carbon footprint. Nevertheless, we can use our influence to improve the upstream processes and morally we should do this.

The next step is the conservation stage of the raw materials which, depending on the region, is done by salting, drying or a combination of the two. Few tanneries receive raw materials directly from abattoirs and immediately transform them before putrefaction sets in. The trend now is to use less salt, although this is sometimes challenging due to climate or distance. The future will be gradually less and, eventually, no salt. Suppliers will need to keep their eye on the ball and seek alternative preservation methods. The first chemical treatment could take place at the abattoir or at the first collection centres.

If the supply chain for the leather industry is better organised, the quality of the raw materials will increase. A well-treated animal produces more milk, better meat and a better hide. This makes the material more valuable.

A quality industry

Many see the tanning industry as the real bad boys as they are told it is this group that uses the chemicals and pollutes the air and the rivers. The tanning industry needs to work on its PR



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and properly present itself to the general public. We can admit that we use chemicals, but that we do so in a responsible way and that we clean up after ourselves when we are done. The older tanneries are being replaced by new concepts with appropriate working environments and where chemicals are being controlled by computer to avoid waste and human error. This creates a safe workplace with full control over its effluent.

The tanning industry is one that constantly invests in research to reduce its use of natural resources, for example by exploiting solar power to reduce its dependency on non-renewable energy sources. It is a quality industry, but in order to be awarded that label we have to address those countries that are damaging our reputation with non-compliance of environmental and social standards.

Tanneries and shoe factories must refuse to buy from non-compliant suppliers and instead focus on quality rather than profit. It is incomprehensible to me that a European importer closes his eyes to the shameful situation in certain areas of countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Kenya, Egypt and many others. He would never treat his workers the way some tannery owners in these countries treat theirs, so why would he accept this situation from one of his suppliers. There are none so blind as those who will not see! How can an importer buy from a tannery that has no effluent treatment facility and so discharges effluent into rivers, as is happening in Savar now? You wouldn't accept this at home, so why accept it from your suppliers?

Workers in shoe or leathersgoods factories are not slaves. They need a clean working place with proper safety and first aid facilities, changing rooms and showers, and centres where mothers can safely leave their small children. A worker who has no worries delivers more and better products. Many managers don't understand this or do not want to understand. They think of production purely in terms of numbers and their bottom line. Your profit is negatively affected when 10% of production is rejected because of sloppy work.

The bigger picture

It is the quality of the industry that we need to present to the general public as this is why the big brands and distribution chains keep buying from us. Those in our value chain who can accept this vision and take serious steps to adhere to it will survive, will expand, and will make more profit. The hand-to-mouth thinkers who try to squeeze their suppliers and workers for those last pennies, those who buy cheap machinery with bad safety devices, those failing to install aspiration plants in their beamhouses to save money and so risk the lives of their workers – they will be forced to throw in the towel.

Progress is made by healthy minds capable of seeing the bigger picture and by those who are tough on one hand and generous on the other; Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Jack Ma and Jeff Bezos and the like. They embarked upon their adventures in order to achieve a dream and to make money, but they never forgot the human factor, the quality factor. As well as being unbelievably rich they are also among the world's biggest philanthropists. If we can aspire to reach this level and make a tannery look more like an Apple store, perhaps we can be mighty proud of our industry. ☺



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