



Fiji water—is it more sustainable than leather?

What has Fiji water to do with leather? Nothing and everything.

During the Golden Globes awards ceremony in January, a lovely young lady in a royal blue dress positioned herself strategically next to or behind so-called stars with a platter on which she carried bottles of Fiji Water. The so-called stars did not appreciate the Fiji Girl's appearance because she stole the show. If the girl, whose name is Kelly Steinbeich, had been promoting leather, many would have protested saying she was promoting a product "made from dead animals" by a "polluting industry".

Promotion of Fiji Water should have brought protests about carbon emissions and pollution because to transport a bottle of water from the spring in Yaqara on the north part of Fiji's Viti Levu island to the United States or other places in the

Western world, where most consumers of this brand of water reside, you rack up a lot of carbon emissions per bottle and the operation is totally unsustainable—but nobody protests. Leather is totally sustainable and everybody protests.

It is not my place to discuss whether Fiji Water is anything special or any different from other mineral waters, but for sure the publicity made by and for Fiji Water makes it seem far more special than it really is. I have tasted it at the source, paying \$0.25 per bottle and I wouldn't pay a penny more for it.

Number two: I am not trying to antagonise the sport fans of the world but, objectively, one must note that to maintain the thousands of golf courses and football pitches in the world, the consumption of water must be astronomical, probably far more than the water consumption of the tanning industry and cattle farming combined. Again, nobody protests.



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Getting a message across

The above are two examples of what the world will tolerate from one commodity but will not tolerate from the leather industry. This is not because people love sport and hate leather. It is that sports, or in the Fiji case, certain commodities, are able to spread a message of public necessity, making consumers understand that without a particular article or a sport event, life would not be worth living. Our industry is not capable of getting even the smallest message through. We do not have the equivalent of the Golden Globes to tell people how beautiful leather is. Sure, we have the Tannery of The Year Awards programme and event, and although it generates a good deal of publicity in those countries where winners are based, it is not shared by enough newspapers and publications to counter the coverage devoted to our critics. As an industry we do not appear to be on their agenda and when our critics launch the most ridiculous statements, historically we do little about it.

I have said time and time again that, to counteract the various anti-leather pressure groups, we need to fight back. The answer I have received is that we are gentlemen and women and prefer not to wage a war against those who attacks us. We are too nice and too polite for that. We talk among ourselves or we talk to other civilised people, like designers, but we never talk to the consumer. God forbid!

In my view, that is totally the wrong approach. I am not saying we should enter the offices of animal rights organisations and start shouting at people, or start hitting vegans, some of whom have attacked our value chain physically on more than one occasion. What I am saying and urging is that we publish honest and objective research about our industry and its products and compare these with competing products. Let's try to get on TV, try to influence or even finance documentaries that will depict our industry in an honest way.

The social network

Animal rights people enter slaughterhouses with hidden cameras hoping to expose horrible situations. We should anticipate those actions and demand improvement in our supply chain and pre-empt the criticism. By now fur critics have ruined the fur industry because the fur industry has been sitting idle and enacted animal welfare changes too late. If we consider how 2018 went for our industry we could be on the same track to oblivion as the fur industry. We have to combat that, actively, not by talking to designers, but to the consumers. The designers are designing, not buying. The consumers are listening to social networks, those that are dominated by leather's critics, not by leather's friends. Even if a pro-leather social media account could somehow amass 10,000 followers, which would be close to a miracle, the animal rights people have a couple of million. Why is that? It is because the animal rights campaigners are savvy communicators and know how to reach the consumer, whereas we don't even try to reach the consumer. They tell a couple of million consumers not to buy leather and we whisper politely to 10,000 to please buy leather. We are shouting against a storm.

Leatherbiz reported just recently that we have a new

enemy, the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health, made up of scientists and campaigners from across the globe. People with an agenda. EAT-Lancet tells us to eat less red meat. Why? Because this will benefit our health and the environment. They come forward with "scientific research and data" but they confirm what I am saying: we have to tackle our enemies with facts, with research and make that available to the consumer. The consumer reads or hears the EAT-Lancet recommendations and I am sure that a great part believes what they see and hear without questioning this one-sided partisan view.

Fakes and facts

Let's consider some facts: life expectancy in the US was 47 years for women in 1900, and 45 for men. In 1950, life expectancy for women was 72 years and for men 67, and in the year 2000, respectively, 80 and 75 years. This positive change happened because we live better, have better medical care and we eat better. We eat better. Although available figures vary, it seems that boneless red meat consumption increased in the US from 25 kg per person per year in 1900 to almost 100 kg per person per year in 2018. Apart from all the other factors that helped us to live longer, it doesn't seem to me that the increase in our red meat consumption had a negative effect on our health. Even if the vegetarian and vegan effect has a relatively small impact on red meat consumption in developed countries, the overall demand for red meat in the world is increasing in spite of all the anti-meat propaganda. Therefore, ever more hides and skins will become available. With the anti-leather trend momentarily increasing, I guess that prices of raw hides and skins, and hence of leather, will drop further. Then, maybe, the footwear industry will rediscover leather as its main source of supply. What counts in the end is the bottom line.

Let me give an example of the right way to counteract a certain type of commercial terrorism. There is continuous talk about palm oil and there is, as with leather, a huge push towards boycotting products that contain palm oil, in spite of the fact that most plantations are sustainable and legal. France's then government minister for ecology, sustainable development and energy, Ségolène Royal, said in June 2015 on French television that people should stop eating Nutella because it was made with palm oil. Nutella producer Ferrero immediately reacted and sued the minister saying that, since the end of 2013, Nutella has been made exclusively with palm oil from palm trees certified as 100% sustainable and guaranteed to have no link to deforestation. Ségolène Royal was promptly forced to retract her accusation and apologised to Ferrero for her false statement.

Think about this. In terms of public relations and defence of our industry, we are pathetic. If the approach doesn't change, it will remain pathetic. Our industry has a turnover of some \$100 billion worldwide so why can't we get \$10 million or \$20 million together to wage a serious promotional campaign and do some serious scientific research on leather? The pussy-footing around makes no sense and until now has provided zero results. On the contrary, it has left the field wide open to the critics. 🌐