



The women's Air Jordan IV x Off-White shoe, the latest result of a collaboration between Virgil Abloh and Nike, shows that leather can unite luxury and streetwear, Fernando Bellese says. Credit: Nike

Circling the wagons has to stop



The chief sustainability officer of leather manufacturing group PrimeAsia, Fernando Bellese, feels strongly that the global leather industry has to stop “circling the wagons” to defend itself from criticism and start moving forward towards a better, more sustainable future. This was clear from comments he made at the inaugural Leather Sustainability Seminar, organised online by leather chemicals manufacturer Buckman and World Leather in July.

Mr Bellese, who joined PrimeAsia at the end of 2019 after eight years at JBS Couros, says that, while it is 100% true and a source of pride for the leather sector to say it uses a by-product from the meat industry and uses that by-product to make one of the oldest materials we have, it is not enough. “We shouldn’t stop there,” he says. “Leather is more than a by-product. It’s such a powerful product in fashion, for example, that it unites luxury and streetwear.” He mentions as an example the ongoing design collaboration between Nike and Louis Vuitton men’s artistic director, Virgil Abloh. The most recent product to result from this was the women’s Air Jordan IV x Off-White shoe, which launched this July. The shoe combines full-grain leather and mesh in the upper. Off-White is Mr Abloh’s own brand.

Chief sustainability officer at PrimeAsia, Fernando Bellese, accepts that leather faces “rough competition” from the makers of other materials, but says there are a number of important, positive actions the sector must take to put in place a more dynamic defence of leather.

More than talk

It is a competitive market, Mr Bellese concedes, with leather fighting against many other materials for customers. “Some of those materials are good,” he says. “Others are not so good and seem to need to devalue leather to gain market share.” In the face of this “rough competition”, though, he is adamant that “circling the wagons” has to stop. Instead, the

mode of transport he would like the leather industry to emulate is a high-speed train. “We need to lead,” he says, “to decide the direction we want to go in, push the limits, innovate and do more than talk. We need to show why we are sustainable.”

He contends that the industry has been too passive. The company he works for, PrimeAsia, is active in many industry initiatives and, in February, launched a new one of its own, Responsibly Raised. This initiative aims to promote good practice across the leather supply chain by promoting projects that are conducive to positive change, enhanced transparency, the better use of resources, fair labour conditions and sound animal welfare standards. Giving visibility to best practice, Fernando Bellese argues, will lead to an increase in demand for that best practice. PrimeAsia also wants to use more renewable energy and to find ways to turn waste into a source of energy or of revenue. It has set itself the target of increasing renewable energy from 20% of all the energy it consumes at the moment to 70% within five years.

Chemical change

In terms of chemicals, his assessment is that leather manufacturers are “heavy” chemical users. “We’ve become a very responsible industry in chemical management,” he says, “but when we talk about reducing our footprint, this means we also need to reduce the amount of chemicals we use and for more of our chemicals to come from renewable resources, to be safe for our employees and the environment, and to play an important role in making safe products.”

Unity of effort will be important if the industry is to make the necessary progress, he says. PrimeAsia became a contributor to the Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals



PrimeAsia is the only leather manufacturer currently involved in setting up base standards for wastewater treatment for tanneries with ZDHC. It would like more of its peers to take part in initiatives of this kind. Credit: WTP



Fernando Bellese, speaking at the APLF exhibition in Hong Kong in 2019.

Credit: APLF

(ZDHC) group in 2016, supporting its campaign for hazardous substances to be eliminated from waste streams in the fashion supply chain. “It has already had a lot of impact on chemical use in fashion,” Fernando Bellese says. Its work continues with, for example, a task team in place now to discuss and set up base standards for wastewater treatment for tanneries. “Only one tanner [PrimeAsia] is engaged,” he points out, “in a task force that is going to create standards for our industry. If we say we require a joint approach but we fail to take part in important initiatives, then we still need to improve.” Other initiatives he regards as important include the Leather Working Group, the Leather Impact Accelerator that Textile Exchange has begun piloting, and the work of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs in China, where PrimeAsia has one of its two tanneries. The IPE gathers detailed information relating to wastewater treatment plants in China and makes it available to the public. He thinks the transparency this offers is positive.

Science-based arguments

Transparency will be of great importance in the months and years ahead because only by being transparent about how companies make leather can the industry take into the public square a convincing response to the attacks and false claims it is subjected to. Transparency is closely tied to traceability, he argues. The search for good, affordable technology solutions that help make leather traceable must continue. The information that brands and consumers want needs to be available to them and it needs to be accurate.

For this reason, he adds that offering transparency also means taking a risk because, when you open your doors to the world, people will see what you are doing well and what you are doing less well. Mr Bellese concludes: “People in the leather industry are always saying that leather is sustainable. I fully believe that leather is sustainable, but saying it is not enough. We need to generate and present more science-based information that shows it’s true.” 