



The Buyer's View



Buyer's View: Lantal



Airbus interior (Courtesy of Airbus)

Cruising in comfort

People think nothing these days of hopping on an aeroplane, a train or even a cruise ship. Travel has become an integral part of modern life and whilst people may think about routes, prices, times and even the most comfortable clothing to wear, the type of seat they are going to sit in is probably never even considered. Fortunately, for the millions of travellers on the move, one company, Switzerland's Lantal Textiles, has spent years optimising the comfort and design of transport upholstery fabrics so that the seat we spend hours in does not become an issue. Founded in 1886, producing mainly wool fabrics for contract interiors, the company has grown and now has manufacturing facilities in Langenthal, Melchnau, and Heerbrug in Switzerland and a subsidiary in the USA. It designs, produces and distributes textiles and services for aircraft, railways, buses and cruise ships.

One of its core businesses is its aviation industry division, which recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, producing upholstery, drapery, leather, carpet, velvets, blankets and headrest covers and can now boast 55-60% of the world market share.

Success by coincidence

Pretty impressive so far...and even more so when you consider that the company moved into this sphere of activity almost by accident.

In 1954 a Dutch representative of Möbelstoffweberei Langenthal (the company's original name) called on KLM seeking to sell the Dutch national airline seat covers for its offices. Unfortunately the salesman failed to clinch the deal, but instead walked away with the company's first order for aircraft seat covers, making it one of the first textile mills to move into the field of soft interiors for passenger aircraft. Transportation textiles proved to be a great success for the company and soon became the focus of its business and took off in more ways than one. Lantal now supplies over 300 airlines including SAA (*South African Airlines*) and Swiss as well as all of the major aircraft and seat manufacturers. It has supplied seat upholstery, wall coverings, carpets, fine leather, and curtains for new aircraft types such as the Airbus A380 and A340-600 as well as specialised projects including an airplane furnished specially for the President of Nigeria.

Taking off in a tough market

There is no doubt of the success Lantal now enjoys, but it seems to contradict the stories filling the pages of the newspapers around the globe. It appears that Lantal is not only surviving, but is veritably flourishing in an industry that has suffered terribly in recent years. Since the terror attacks of 9/11, airlines have been suffering through difficult economic situations and structural crises. These problems have been further exacerbated with the recent rises in fuel prices. This has led to cut backs in terms of staffing levels and in new investment in airplanes and upgrading interiors. Despite this situation the company achieved consolidated sales of CHF97.7 million (\$74.6 million) in 2004 (90% of which were exports), an 11.5% increase over 2003 and succeeded in increasing productivity to such an extent that the company took on an extra 31 staff. The way the company has achieved this is through illustrating to airlines how interior design can differentiate them from their competitors.

Corporate identity

Nobody comments on "standard" ➤



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Lantal leather (Photo: Lantal)

interiors, but one often hears travellers comment on 'full length beds' and leather seats. As Lantal points out, the costs involved in upgrading the interior of an aircraft are modest in comparison with hardware expenditure. In fact an airline only needs to invest about 0.06% of the purchase price of the aircraft in the 'soft' interior and the return on the investment is significant in that it creates a "corporate identity and accommodates the needs of the passenger." However, in order to offer companies customised, individual interiors Lantal has to continually innovate and offer the highest quality products, which it has proved very capable of doing. It has introduced new products designed specifically with the aviation industry in mind. For instance, at the beginning of 2005, the company collaborated with German seat manufacturer Recaro Aircraft Seating to produce a pneumatic seat system to optimise passenger comfort. It has also developed a new generation of lightweight upholstery fabrics and carpets that weigh as much as 20% less than conventional fabrics, which allow airlines to cut costs, and has come up with other innovations such as Climatex fabrics that offer climatized seating thanks to a moisture management system. All of these innovations are also tested to meet industry standards as the company is certified as a testing station according to FAA/JAA (Federal Aviation Administration/Joint Aviation Authorities) regulations in Switzerland and the USA.

It also offers kudos to airlines by using only top quality materials. Lantal produces its own fabrics and although it sources its leather, the company demands the same level of quality as in its own, in-house products. All of Lantal's leather is produced by Gimmel AG based in Arbon,

Switzerland, and is used in interiors created for all of Lantal's major airline customers such as Swiss.

Quality not quantity

Despite the fact that leather accounts for a fairly small proportion of the interiors that appear in modern aircraft, the choice offered by Lantal is nonetheless impressive. It has a standard colour range of 64 colours, with the basic colour range for bus and train interiors including an additional 21 colours, designed to complement the company's fabric collections. If this were not enough, in an effort to always please its

customers, Lantal will offer further colours outside its range in quantities as low as one hide, tanned and dyed to precise specifications. This is because according to Lantal, "The exquisite beauty and true naturalness of our leather is an impressive and important design element in passenger cabin interiors." Furthermore the colour ranges are reviewed every three years, although the company admits that the colour requirements do not change too often and colours can remain in the offer for up to eight to 10 years.

Lantal extols the virtues of the use of leather in transportation interiors for its characteristic comfort properties attributed to the fact that it is a natural material which is supple, soft, flexible and durable.

Not only can the customer specify the colour of the leather used in its interiors it also has a choice in the quality of leather. Lantal offers three grades of leather in its Lacar Prestige range which are produced from aniline-dyed European cattle hides:

Genuine leather Economy GPL is the starting grade although it is still a high



The company's colour range



Lantal pneumatic aircraft seat with no foam to reduce weight and improve flammability



Sports bar on board Holland America's Westerdam (Photo courtesy of Holland America Line)

quality leather with a slightly embossed, buffed surface. Slight irregularities are corrected with fine sandpaper, finished in the customary way and then surface embossed with haircell pores to achieve a smooth, uniform feel.

Genuine leather Classic GPL is high quality which is lightly embossed to restore the smoothness of the leather.

Genuine leather Extra GPL is produced from the best selection of raw hides without embossing. The full grain surface is coated with light tinted finishes to enhance the functionality of the leather, making it lightfast, water and oil repellent and permeable to water vapour.

As with all its other products Lantal also offers further variations depending on the customer's needs. Its Classic and Economy grades are also available with four alternative embossings and can be ordered in perforated leather.

Not only do the leathers used offer the highest level of quality and comfort, they are also produced in an ecologically friendly way. The processes used in tanning use no amine-based azo dyes or any fat or grease containing AOX products and thanks to their flame-resistance, lightfastness, oil resistance and water repellency, the leathers meet all of the industry's airworthiness standards.

Lantal also uses sheepskin in its interiors, especially in pilot's seats as the fibres keep pilots comfortable all year round. As sheepskin does not conduct heat, it provides comfort, even in extreme temperatures. The company uses Sporty's sheepskin seat covers to keep pilots cool in the summer, warm in the winter and maintain a high level of comfort thanks to the materials natural moisture management properties that mean it can absorb 30% of its weight in moisture before feeling wet to the touch.

Spreading its wings

Despite its undisputed leading position in the aviation sector, Lantal continues to seek new avenues of diversification and has expanded further into the bus, rail, and the lucrative cruise industries, now supplying well known names such as Holland America and Royal Caribbean. It can provide every furnishing material required on a ship from flame resistant tablecloths to fine leathers, all of which comply with IMO (International Marine Organisation) requirements.

In diversifying its business Lantal is ensuring its market share in a fiercely competitive market, however, the aviation industry remains and will continue to remain one of its core businesses.

"Aviation has lost none of its fascination, but the economic factors are complex and the competition is fierce. This is why innovative solutions are embraced in the field of aircraft interiors as well. Stringent safety regulations, weight reductions, and the systematic integration of corporate identity elements are some of the key issues in this context. We are deliberately investing in the development of new technologies and want to keep strengthening our position as the market leader," says Dr Urs Rickenbacher, CEO of Lantal Textiles.

An almost accidental success story, Lantal learnt quickly that to lead in such a competitive market it had to offer innovative, top quality products to meet the demands of the aviation industry, as well as the other transportation sectors that it has entered. This means that while innovation in fabric technology will ensure the company's future success, thanks to its unrivalled luxury and natural comfort properties, leather will continue to play an important role in the company's product range. And, as long as passengers continue to sit comfortably, whether it be on a plane, a train, a bus or even a cruise ship, Lantal intends to continue to sit on the top of the pile in terms of market share. 🌐