



A problem for leather

The internet and social media have between them revolutionised the way that most of us live or are forced to live. We are caught up in a whirlwind of change that to the younger generation is exciting and invigorating. To the older one it can be confusing and, to a certain extent, frightening as it appears to turn so many accepted norms on their heads. One of these is the constant pressure to do everything online with no actual contact with people or products.

A prime example of this is the rapidly changing face of retail and, in the case of the footwear industry, the paradigm shift in how footwear is being sold. The high streets and shopping malls, with their multiple shoe retailers, are fast giving way to internet search engines and online businesses willing to provide a broad range of products delivered to the customer's door in 24 hours or even less. The result is a generation of consumers who increasingly no longer connect with the sensory aspects of leather and what it has to offer.

Instead, they prefer to select a style based on impulse and perception. The construction or material used to produce it is secondary when considering the overall look and ability to obtain it 'just in time' for their use, without even leaving their home. This concept of purchasing is broad based and is being used by a growing number of consumers to the point that there are predictions that online retailing will soon overtake that of conventional physical shopping. Ordering shoes via an android, galaxy or iPhone is becoming second nature to a whole generation of consumers.

This is clearly not good news for leather as it is very difficult to transmit sensory perceptions in a virtual world and, more to the point, do internet retailers really care as long as they shift stock? Put simply, shoe brands have taken complete control of the materials used in producing their footwear based solely on marketing and image or, dare we suggest, profit margin. The online image and

marketing of a shoe removes the need for the consumer to touch and feel the product and so the human connection that is essential in making the case for leather uppers is by-passed. By losing the sensory aspect, it has become easier to replace leather in footwear.

In their defence, the large brands can legitimately claim that faced with rapidly increasing leather prices from 2012 through 2014, it was entirely logical to switch their leather uppers over to alternative materials. Demand for cotton, canvas and non-wovens is scalable depending on finished product sales, unlike leather which is only a by-product of the meat industry. The record-setting hide prices of 2014 have caused leather to lose a meaningful segment of the shoe industry and it is becoming increasingly doubtful that this situation is likely to change in the near future as sales of leather to the automotive industry continue to grow, effectively replacing those lost to footwear and so supporting the hide market for some time to come. 🍷