

Mud sticks

We live in contrary world. Only a few short years ago, leading brands in many consumer industries actively promoted the use of leather in their products. It was described as being a unique, natural and sustainable material that was also durable, hard wearing and a statement of quality. In a word, in marketing terms, leather was 'good'. All of a sudden, it is starting to be portrayed as being something to be avoided. In other words, it has now become 'bad'.

Putting to one side the cost factor which has persuaded many brands to move to using synthetics and which has been covered at length in *World Footwear* and its sister publication *World Leather*, why the growing denigration of leather? As a material, it has not intrinsically changed and, in fact, in most instances the finished material coming out of tanneries today is better in terms of quality than it has ever been and is produced in a manner that is least injurious to the environment as is humanly possible.

The situation has in fact moved on to the point where some of these brands now seem to believe that any kind of statement against leather will be favourable for sales of their finished products. Take, for example, Audi's description of its e-tron GT concept car, a premium electric model due for release in 2020, where it is referred to as 'the first vegan Audi' simply because the seats are covered with 'synthetic leather'.

Having previously promoted leather seating as desirable, the company now wants to appear 'modern' and 'lifestyle', but carefully avoids the word 'plastic', the material it has chosen to use. Note, however, the inclusion of the word leather in this description. The inference here is that this is still leather of 'some sort', but one that has not required the slaughter of any animals. The key word here, however, is 'vegan'.

IF MEAT IS BAD THEN SO IS LEATHER

Negative publicity aimed at modern farming methods has been growing for some time now, fuelled by misinformation and disinformation from environmental groups and encouraged by a media in western countries always on the lookout for an alarmist story. Green lobbyists all too often continue to quote a 2006 United Nations report claiming greenhouse gas emissions from farming were in excess of those emanating from transport. Even though this was later retracted, they still choose to ignore the true facts because it suits them to do so.

The meat and dairy sectors, in particular, have come under fire in regard to their environmental impact generally and red meat specifically as having an adverse effect on human health. A recent report by Oxford University in the UK suggests red meat is so bad for health that it should be subject to a tax to force people to eat less of it. The logical extension of this sort of thinking would therefore appear to be that if red meat is bad then, logically, leather must also be bad because it is derived from the animals that provide that red meat.

This is what vegans already think and the extent to which their views are now being publicised by some sections of the media, without question is becoming increasingly noticeable even though they form such a small percentage of consumers. In the UK, for example, although 50% of people are now apparently interested in pursuing a plant-based diet, only 5% are actually true vegetarians and a mere 2% are practising vegans. How is it that the opinions of such a small proportion of a given population can be afforded so much attention?

Unfortunately, it seems that these days anyone with extremist views is granted maximum publicity. The

animal rights movement has taken full advantage of this and is pushing the 'animals are sentient beings so farming and everything associated with it is cruel' theme for all it is worth.

This leads one to ask the question as to why no one seems able or willing to expose these falsehoods and explain to consumers that although ceasing to eat beef and other meat will stop leather being produced, ceasing the use of leather will not stop the commercial production of meat. Nor will it stop the small scale farming that feeds and sustains small families in so many parts of the world. The production and consumption of meat and beef is already a complex and difficult field, but when it comes to all the related products such as milk and its derivatives it becomes far more complicated.

Furthermore, overall consumption of meat continues to rise as more and more of the world's population is able to afford it. 2018 was in fact a record year for beef producers. To quote one pundit, "The anti-beef campaign has not been successful. Beef and meat production and consumption are growing globally. In their frustration the interested groups are targeting leather and pulling away any respect they claim to have for the animal, which is offering all it has, by arguing against using everything and wasting nothing. Not one animal fewer will be produced just because the skin is not processed."

However, it is also true that the decline in leather consumption is not actually related to an anti-leather feeling among consumers. It is, as mentioned earlier, a decision by manufacturers to go for cheaper materials and easier production, accepting that the life cycle and the quality of their finished products will deteriorate. Cheaper, easier with a better margin is the driver—nothing else. Leather must therefore be able to offer a better margin than those



alternatives and the way that hide prices are continuing to fall raises hope that things 'might' begin to change during the next twelve months

At present, however, manufacturers and retailers do not see any potential for increasing sales using leather, so they are trying a different marketing ploy. It may work or it may not, but at least it has the advantage of being 'new' and part of a wider concept of health and environmental consciousness. Whether synthetics are actually good or not does not matter, it is enough that they are not 'bad' in the sense that leather is purported to be and so you can gain social credit from it. And in the modern world of social media, this is more important than the true substance of the matter. As if the leather industry did not have enough problems already, it is now the butt of extremist campaigners given added voice by an irresponsible media.

There is nothing wrong with farming; it has sustained us for thousands of years. There is similarly nothing wrong with leather; it is an excellent, sustainable raw material

that has stood us in good stead for the same amount of time. Plastics have been with us for only 100 years or so and just look at the environmental problems they have caused and are still causing for the world in general and the oceans in particular. We seem to have lost all sense of proportion and rush from one environmental disaster to another without thinking things through properly and without heeding all the obvious warnings.

Unfortunately, people—and young people in particular—are increasingly susceptible to social media hype and more willing to believe some well known celebrity's ill-informed blog than any sensible qualified opinion. Perhaps if some celebrity could be persuaded to explain that the world will go on eating meat regardless and that, if we cease using

its major by-product leather, a new environmental problem will occur through the disposal of millions of unwanted animal hides, then people might begin to think about it more clearly. In the meantime, verbal muck will continue to be thrown at the use of leather for all the wrong reasons and, unfortunately, as in the case of the real thing, there is a danger that some of it will stick. 🐾