

WORLD FOOTWEAR

Elastogran's Villanova d'Asti competence centre

Elastogran is one of the leading suppliers of polyurethane moulding compounds to the footwear industry and like everyone else has had to come to terms with the transformation of the industry during the past ten years.

Dr. Antonio Franco was appointed as European Business Manager Footwear in 2003 with the task of seeking answers to the problems caused by globalisation. World Footwear was recently able to ask him about the future development of the company.

Creating partnerships creates strength

Europe has serious manufacturing problems. What does that mean for Elastogran?

In the past decades the footwear industry has moved from Northern to Southern and then to Eastern Europe. Now, much of it has moved on to South East Asia and the Far East. It is essential that we, in turn, follow our customers and give them the same degree of technical support they have received in Europe in order for us to remain competitive in the footwear business.

How are you organised to react quickly and effectively to customer needs?

At our competence centre for shoe systems in Villanova d'Asti, Italy, all aspects of research and development are

brought together. Sales and marketing is broken up into market segments covering safety shoes, sports shoes, street wear and slip-on shoes. Each area has its own specialities, and due to the separation, we can focus fully on our customers.

Has polyurethane been sufficiently promoted as a soling material for footwear?

This is an important point for our marketing. Elastogran is the market leader for shoe-sole systems in Europe. However, there is still much potential for us to tap. We need to move further back up the production chain as far as the actual footwear specifiers, in order to promote the excellent properties of PUR.

We need to demonstrate that first-class and top-quality

FOOTWEAR MANAGEMENT

shoes can be made with our PUR systems. Therefore, we intend to increase our dialogue with both shoe designers and materials developers so that the specific characteristics and properties of our materials can be incorporated at an early stage of the product development cycle.

The inherent advantages of our PUR materials can only be used in a creative way if they are fully explained. In order to do this effectively, we have created the new position of materials and applications consultant (MAC), with the sole responsibility of liaising with customers and providing them with technical advice.

How are you reacting to market demands?

We work closely with our clients with the aim of placing PU in higher quality and higher profile brands in the hope that this will, in turn, create a trend for increased overall use of this excellent material. After all, our development activities go far beyond the responsibilities of a raw materials supplier. Innovative ideas and first-class customer service are among our key strengths.

In addition, as we seek to supply only first-class systems, it is also possible to offer co-marketing to clients, which also demonstrates the quality of our products to the consumer. Take Elastoflite for example, where Elastogran would consider helping the customer in promoting the final product. Co-operation should not be purely technical, but also should include a degree of co-marketing to mutual benefit.

What are your latest developments and the mid-term goals?

Our new slogan comes straight to the point: 'Foot comfort by Elastogran'. We are working on a number of interesting projects which are either already available on the market or soon will be. The super light Elastoflite system is ideal for high-quality shoes and can replace materials which are currently being used. In addition there will be multi-coloured soles and special PU systems for coatable wood-like soles.

Our overall aim is to apply our skills and experience in close co-operation with our customers in order to create a shoe market in Europe, which will focus on quality rather than price, and establish new and profitable trends for the future.

Faced with a deluge of different quality level products from the Far East, there is only one way in which European manufacturing can hope to survive—whether in the footwear industry or any other—and that is to specialise in quality and technical excellence.

European companies such as ours have a long record of developing new products and systems. This has to be an essential part in our efforts to compete with Far East competition. While the volumes may not be as large as in the lower cost areas of the market, margins will be better.

PUR in its latest forms, is a most versatile material that can be applied to almost all types of footwear. It currently comprises only around 7% of the global soling material market, but has so many comfort and wear advantages that it ought to be far greater.

Dr. Franco obviously believes it should. 

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