

# A new approach

In this issue, **Andrea Guolo** focuses on the Cotance General Assembly, which took place on 29 May. Andreas Kindermann, CEO of Austria's Wollsdorf Leder tannery, talks to him regarding his new position as president and the pressing responsibilities it comes with.

**E**fficient communication among those working in the European leather industry is expected to be the key focus for the future, according to Cotance. In the general assembly that took place on 29 May in Verona, Italy, Andreas Kindermann was unanimously elected president of the European tanning association. Kindermann is CEO of the

Austria-based Wollsdorf Leder, a leading producer for the automotive industry, and will be assisted in his new role by vice-presidents Thomas Bee (Schafstall, VDL, immediate past president), Rino Mastrotto (Rino Mastrotto Group, UNIC) and Jean Christophe Muller (Tanneries Haas, FFTM).

His new presidency begins at a time when the industry is facing a number of

major challenges. This year's AGM focused on the defence and promotion of the leather industry, notably the image of leather.

The assembly opened with a video produced by UNIC that sought to demystify stories put out by vegan and environmental activist organisations, and distributed via the internet and social media. The perception of the leather

Andreas Kindermann (left) shakes hands with Cotance vice-president Thomas Bee.



industry has been greatly influenced by such activity. Attendees also watched the recent *Leather Naturally* video and another produced by it to promote its latest leather-covered G4 smartphone.

Delegates agreed that intensifying and developing the Cotance strategy in support of the image of leather across various platforms, and pushing for mandatory authenticity legislation in Europe and developing a web-based communication campaign addressing consumers, were essential.

For a long time, the industry has reacted to attacks by ignoring them or responding via legal action; these methods are no longer effective as it has become necessary to talk directly to the final consumer to communicate the unique and sustainable nature of leather while at the same time addressing negative news reports.

Tanners can no longer leave outdated modes of communication to their customers. They need to engage directly and work together in a supply chain.

"I have asked our secretary general to make a survey among all members for identifying their priorities and setting a common agenda around shared issues and priorities," Kindermann told me after his election was announced. "There are, however, objectives that were highlighted in Verona that I understand will occupy most of my presidency."

*Leather International* sits down with Kindermann to find out more.

### **What will be Cotance's main actions?**

**Andreas Kindermann:** They concern EU authenticity rules and communicating leather to the wider public for counterbalancing the fake news that we sadly see proliferating in the media. In addition, I would like to highlight the high standards of the European leather industry and the top-quality products we are producing every day.

### **What is the state of health of European tanneries?**

Good, in general. European tanners are top players in all market segments, and because of this it is important to continuously invest in the future. The European industry is top notch, and we need to stay there. Together with our

partners in the chemical and machine industries, we are continuously improving, and R&D is an important part of our business.

### **Do you think that the current crisis for leather of the casual footwear sector is cyclical or permanent?**

Both. Leather is unlikely to reconquer certain lower, mass-market segments of the footwear business, but I understand that it has a bright future in the higher-end market. There, we will soon be seeing a strong comeback of leather in major catwalk collections [of the fashion industry]. There is nothing like leather on your feet.

### **As head of Wollsdorf Leder, you're very familiar with the automotive sector. Can it still grow or has it matured?**

There is always room for growth if you have the right product. Leather is an important element of high-class car interiors. The high reputation of leather, and its special touch and feel, contribute to the 'feel-good' atmosphere in cars, and this will be reflected in the future as well.

### **The initiatives of luxury holding groups – LVMH, Kering, Hermes and such – in the tanning world, with the acquisition of several tanneries, could be a risk, or an opportunity. Do you think there will be new acquisitions in the future?**

This is difficult to say. I understand that for many fashion and luxury brands with leather as a core business, owning their own leather-production sites is a wise business decision, but it all depends on the business model. I do not see vertical integration occurring in the automotive sector.

### **At the Verona meeting, Cotance focused on false narratives related to leather. How do you intend to fight the spread of this damaging information?**

With a little help from our friends. We have to coordinate our actions and we need to be focused on achieving tangible results. Cotance and all of its members will not remain silent in front of fake news. Everybody in the leather sector is concerned, and has to act. All organisations in the leather sector need to work together and coordinate their

activities. It is important that misleading descriptions are addressed. Therefore, it is essential that our governments understand the need to set clear and simple authenticity rules at EU level.

### **Do you anticipate any action on this?**

We need to focus on putting out correct information regarding leather. We need to educate people about leather, otherwise they are going to be miseducated by those who do not like leather. Customers and influencers need to receive simple and clear messages about the truth of leather. Leather has so many positive features: it is a by-product of the dairy and meat industries; it is the best use of a residual material; and it is highly durable and sustainable. We are currently setting up this strategy, but we must not forget the good results achieved so far in terms of persuading certain well-known operators to adhere to strict language and messaging.

### **Do you think that the example of Italy's Confindustria Moda should be followed at European level, in terms of greater confederation in European fashion – including the leather sector – allowing a louder voice in difficult international negotiations?**

Time will tell. I am sceptical of its continued representation in an organisation where it is considered the "last wheel on the car". Cotance is doing a great job in Brussels though, and on most issues tackled, we tanners cannot complain.

### **What do you intend to do in terms of luxury companies making difficult demands of tanneries? And what sort of policy could be carried forward from this?**

The European industry provides leather to the market that complies with the highest standards. Therefore, I am not afraid of any test to confirm these standards [are upheld]. However, all testing costs need to be internalised and reflected in the price of leather. Tests that do not give the customer a higher assurance regarding quality and sustainability should be challenged and re-evaluated. ■