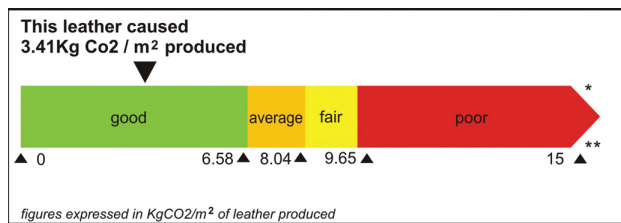


Measure for Measure

ISA Tan Tec introduces a new guideline for gauging tanneries' environmental impact.



IN AUGUST '07, the ISA Tan Tec leather tannery in China made a commitment to green up its procedures—not by implementing chrome-free tanning, but by improving its systems through the recycling of water and heat, energy savings and less chemical usage to create what it has dubbed LITE (Low Impact To the Environment) Leather. But in order to convey the progress it had made in terms of cutting back on CO₂ emissions and water consumption, it needed a benchmark to measure against. According to sales director John Graebin, “We could see our improvement, but it was still difficult for outside people to understand how good or bad our [leather] was compared to other options.”

After being audited by the BLC Leather Technology Centre, which assesses the compliance and eco-performance of footwear leather tanners and could provide an average measurement across the industry, ISA Tan Tec began developing a CO₂ Guide—a simple bar graph meant to help both leather purchasers and consumers comprehend the impact of a tannery’s green efforts (or lack thereof). “Using this guide, we could pinpoint where we were compared to the industry and [our] target for good environmental impact,” Graebin says. “It was simple to put that into an easy format that an everyday consumer could look at and understand.”

ISA Tan Tec measures the impact of each of its LITE Leather products and now includes the bar graphs in its catalog so buyers can see how they measure up to the industry standard. Graebin notes the guide was well accepted during the company’s U.S. sales tour this fall, largely because it is so easy to understand. “The biggest complaint from our customers was that it was hard for them to make a judgment on green materials—there are so many pros and cons,” he says, noting this was especially true since ISA Tan Tec changed its means of production rather than the product itself. “With any changes, you have to analyze the consequences. It’s not black and white.”

Graebin believes the CO₂ Guide could easily be applied to finished shoes, and is a good way to compare apples to apples in the world of greener footwear. “It’s a simple concept to evaluate the impact of each pair of shoes produced,” he says, since it uses the same calculations and measurements, providing a common ground for shoppers to evaluate different shoes

and brands’ claims of being greener. Further, Graebin says that current LITE Leather customers—a list that includes Nike, Timberland, Hush Puppies, Keen, Reef and Simple—have expressed excitement over the fact that they can use the graph to more clearly inform their customers about the brands’ green initiatives. ISA Tan Tec wants to get the message out to end buyers, too, for that same reason. “Most of our marketing is not aimed at our own direct customer, but *their* customers,” Graebin says. “We wanted to educate them, make them understand the whole package, [and to provide information] companies can use to add value to their product.” In addition, ISA Industrial Ltd. is founding a consulting firm, GreenLITE-Systems, to help companies green up production along the lines of the LITE Leather approach, as well as implement a similar CO₂ Guide for their own products. —L.S.

