

Trail Head

Green is Everywhere, Yet Still Nowhere

Viewpoints from last month's 29th Semiannual NW Apparel and Footwear Materials Show

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I viewed the aisles of the NW Apparel and Footwear Materials Show with anticipation—are the vendors ahead of their customers on the green technology path or the other way around? After chatting up many of the vendors, it appears they are still trying to figure out how to put their best foot forward.

Many vendors interchange the words renewable, recyclable, and sustainable. (See Inside Outdoor Spring 2007 “Backwashing Greenwash” for a glossary of green terminology).

Some of the vendors were frank, saying they have not done anything to green their business. The majority had started using “green” or “Eco” in their marketing collateral. Most tout their use of recycled PET (polyethylene terephthalate) from soft drink bottles. Worldwide, the estimate for recycled PET is 1.5 million tons. Of that amount, 40 percent goes to China, a portion of which goes into materials hawked at this show.

Although it is good to see progress being made in this area, this is old news. As we all know, Patagonia has been using recycled PET since 1993—almost 15 years!

Other vendors site their use of “closed-loop conservation.” That is, adding raw material waste generated during the manufacturing process to virgin raw material during the manufacture of new product. Texon, for one, saves energy by incorporating 20 percent waste from their factories and like waste from their customers into their Sportflex series thermoplastic box toe product. In fact, Cedra Garcia, brand account manager, told me they have been doing this practice across their range for years as a way to save on raw materials costs. It appears that others, such as Freudenberg, have been doing the same.

PLA (polylactic acid, a corn starch-based plastic resin replacement) is starting to appear on these vendors' radar. When asked how much PLA was mixed with other materials, none of the vendors were able to tell me how much and with what. You can get 100 percent PLA to compost into biomass in 180 days. Will a material mixed with PLA do the same or leave behind toxic residue?

Not all green initiatives, or lack thereof, were stale. An emerging story in cleaning up the corporate act came from ISA Tan Tec, a German-owned leather supplier out of Guang Zhou China. Bill Bartholomew, their vice president of marketing, explained that founder and CEO, Thomas Schneider, decided that offering just one or two eco-friendly leather products in a notoriously dirty and wasteful industry was disingenuous. Schneider took a bold step by making greening his business a priority, not just for his business but also for the leather-producing sector.

Last year, he initiated the Green Tanners Association of China, an association of leather producers for the footwear, automotive and furniture industries. No doubt his influence will be an important step in utilizing ISO 14064 standards in transparency and verification of the tannery's sustainable efforts. Bartholomew quipped that the recycled water program at Guang Zhou factory is so effective; they are talking about bottling the water. I'm sure it will be in a recycled container (see www.liteleather.com for more details on their sustainability-oriented corporate culture).

Finally, another interesting observation I heard came from Hiroshi Yonemoto, director and general manager of Okahata, a trading company for Teijin, the company Patagonia help put on the recycling map. Yonemoto said two years ago no one asked him about Okahata's environmental solutions. Now everyone is asking, he said.

Teijin also is doing something about converting recycled PE (polyethylene) back into virgin PE. Roy Hill,

sales manager and an avid environmentalist at Freudenburg, pointed out the problem: the polymer strands of recycled PE become so short, they no longer can be spun into fiber. What Teijin is doing is collecting retired clothing from Patagonia's recycled PE collections and breaking them down to their molecular components and re-manufacturing virgin PE. That cradle-to-cradle approach shows what vendors and customers can do when they work together for a sustainable solution. With 38 billion PET bottles going into U.S. landfills annually, their efforts cannot come soon enough.