EXECUTIVE INTERVIEW

Turning fortunes

What happens when you combine beauty, function, technology and fashion with a sincere commitment to the environment? The unique, multi-faceted and trademarked material known as Alcantara®

When Andrea Boragno took the position of CEO at Alcantara, the company had been through some tough times and he was tasked with turning its fortunes around. "There was an issue of credibility, together with a problem of brand positioning, so there were several things to do. The first was to reduce costs, which is easy. However, repositioning the brand takes time. In that first year, in 2005, we saw a reduction in costs, but we didn’t increase sales. In fact, our sales continued to drop by about 15 per cent. In 2006, we started to see the light at the end of the tunnel and sales began to improve. The brand at that stage was positioned as a functional brand, but that turned out to be a big mistake, as we were missing a huge opportunity."

Andrea could see the potential to reposition Alcantara as a unique product. "There was a demand in the market for something exclusive, fashionable and also beautiful in an emotional and sensual way. At the same time, we adhered to the concept of sustainability. Obviously implementing this concept was a revolution for the company, involving the whole organisation: the manufacturing, technical and R&D structures at the first stage, and then also sales, design, marketing and communications.”
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A key point is that Alcantara views sustainability as an opportunity, as opposed to just a cost, which is pretty much the view of the industry. In fact, it has been a key part of Alcantara’s competitive strategy; a significant part of the added value of the brand comes from the company’s serious commitment to sustainability.

“Sustainability is a very complex issue,” says Andrea. “It’s environmental care, it’s social responsibility and it’s also about economic sustainability. We started working on environmental sustainability in 2009, when we reduced our carbon footprint as much as current technology allows and got the Carbon Neutrality status. To achieve this goal, we significantly reduced CO₂ emissions and still continue to try to reduce them. We have a plan in place to further reduce CO₂ emissions over the next three-to-five years. Of course, it’s impossible to eliminate them completely, that’s the reality. Therefore, the amount of CO₂ emissions deriving from our activities are offset by participating in projects patronised by the United Nations that help bring green energy to developing countries.

“Additionally, environmental sustainability has a strong social impact. CO₂ emissions cause climate change and that, of course, affects people, particularly those who live in extreme poverty. The green energy projects we work on also bring jobs and education to developing countries, so that’s another form of social sustainability,” - Andrea Boragno

In order to become Carbon Neutral, Alcantara has had to engage its suppliers to become partners in finding better solutions. “Our commitment to sustainability is from the cradle to the grave, so to speak,” explains Andrea. “In other words, we’re not just concerned with emissions produced during manufacturing, but also the raw materials, transporting the product, and what happens to the product at the end of its life. That’s why we have to consider all of our suppliers and where they stand on sustainability.”

The business is expanding rapidly into the US and Chinese markets, as well as increasing its market share in Europe. Andrea can see potential for further growth, particularly as possible uses for the Alcantara material are endless and he can see there being many more applications for it in the coming years. “We have very close relationships with designers and creative, artistic people,” says Andrea. “We have a unique and fantastic product with enormous potential. We give the artists the opportunity to express their creativity and they come back with new ways to use the material.”

Currently used in collaborations with luxury brands in the fields of fashion, interior design, automotive, yachting, aviation and consumer electronics, it’s exciting to dream of what the designers will come up with next for this beautiful, versatile and environmentally-friendly material.

In the same year we issued our first Sustainability Report, as part of a wider transparent approach towards our stakeholders. Transparency is a must when dealing with such a serious topic as sustainability: being transparent about what we do and what we don’t do, and also about our plans for the future, makes our commitment credible and reliable. This is not a common approach within the industry and many players are ‘greenwashing’ rather than taking actions; there are managers who permit practices out of their domestic borders for which they would go to prison in their own country.”

“Another thing that we do is monitor the sustainability credentials of our vendors and suppliers. This is something extremely relevant to us and, as a consequence, our procurement policy is very scrupulous. Nobody can be seriously committed to sustainability if they have no idea what takes place upstream from their own processes. This is why we periodically check, certify and, if necessary, make adjustments along our supply chain.

“Alcantara also organises events where experts can talk to the community to raise awareness about the importance of sustainability and also to bring about new, better ideas about how we do business.” Last October, in collaboration with the Venice International University, it organised an international symposium on sustainability in the automotive industry. It brought together academics from different universities around the world and key people within the industry. Andrea says it was a huge success: “There were lots of great ideas that came out of it and everyone was very excited.”

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"We are proud, long-standing suppliers of Alcantara. Using our One Way sustainability tool, Archroma helps Alcantara to select eco-advanced dyes and chemicals bringing higher performance to their products, whilst reducing time, water and energy consumption in their own production." - Alexander Wessels, CEO, Archroma

Together with the newly joined former BASF textile chemicals business team, Archroma offers innovative technologies especially designed to take up your challenges – in every step of the production chain. Supported by our pioneering ONE WAY Sustainability Service, which integrates ZDHC MRSL compliant products, our dyes and chemicals enhance the properties and aesthetics of textiles.

We know what drives your markets, and we support you with global presence, expert technical know-how and a strong commitment to developing responsible solutions.

We touch and color people’s lives every day, everywhere www.textiles.archroma.com