

There are times when good business decisions are born as much from instinct as from intelligent reasoning. Such was the case when Cindy Stangl, general manager of Faytex, the producer of Dri-Lex moisture management shoe linings, first started to investigate a new fiber from DuPont that had just been given its own FTC (US Federal Trade Commission) classification. It is called Triexta and it represents a new generic fibre subclass in the PTT (polytrimethylene terephthalate) category. At the time, it was the first new extension the FTC had approved for textiles in five years but that, was not the reason Triexta or, to use its brand name, Sorona intrigued her.

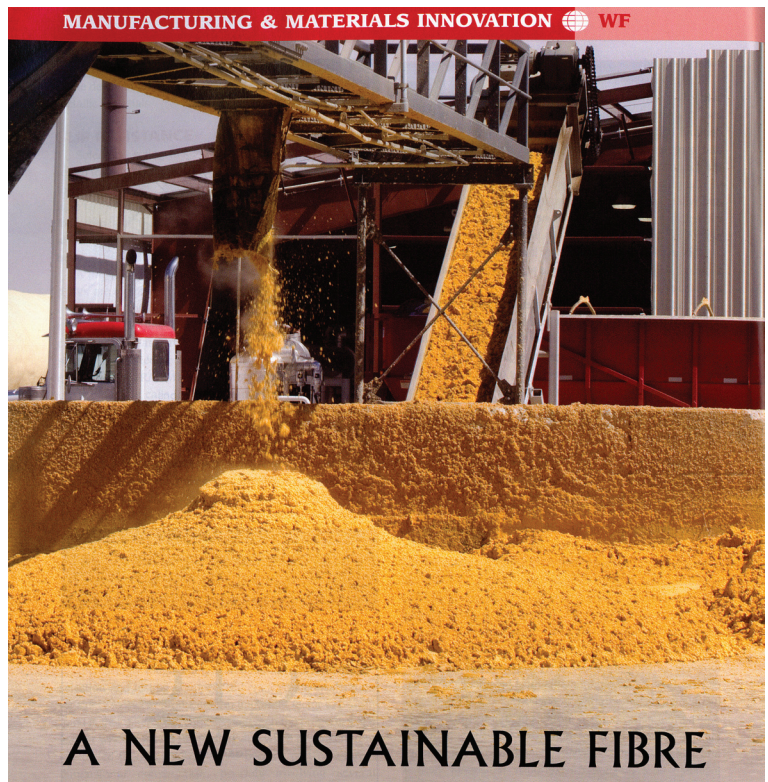
The year was 2009 and Faytex was well into its fourth year of environmentally friendly fabrics for footwear manufacturers around the world. Under its brand name of Dri-Lex, the company had already created more than a dozen fabrics using recycled polyester, wool, organic cotton and rayon extracted from bamboo. But many of those same customers were looking for something new, something made from sustainable materials with benefits consumers could see, feel and easily understand. Instinctively, Ms Stangl felt Sorona might well be it.

When the FTC issued its ruling on March 20 of that year, Sorona was well on its way to being a commercial success in a totally unrelated business: carpeting. SmartStrand carpeting by Mohawk with Dupont Sorona fibers was first introduced to consumers in 2004. As the FTC was delivering its ruling, the company's web site asserted that its new carpets represented the most advanced innovation in carpet fiber technology in the last 20 years. It went on to claim that features including softness, stain protection, durability and environmental benefits all added up to better consumer satisfaction.

CARPETS TO LININGS

Although carpets had little in common with shoe linings, Ms Stangl began to wonder if this new fibre could make the transition from 'underfoot' to 'against' the foot. To find out, she began discussions with the DuPont team at the Winter Outdoor Retailer show in early 2010 and, within a very brief period of time, she had her answer.

"On every count we use to measure performance characteristics of a fibre, Sorona was superior. Its hand was just as Mohawk had described it, very soft with an amazing feel against the foot. It was durable and had outstanding elasticity that resisted stretching and sagging. And, most importantly, it was made from fermented plant sugars and thus was sustainable. As an added bonus, the Sorona manufacturing process produced about 63% fewer greenhouse gases and used 30% less energy than nylon; manufacture. This fibre gave us another new arrow in our quiver of recycled and renewable fabrics as well as a unique marketing story to tell. "The new product also fitted in well with our long-term goals. We have been very fortunate to have been able to build a successful business around our Dri-Lex range, the original line of synthetic moisture movement fabrics which my father first introduced in the



1980s. When you have a successful company, you can start thinking a little further into the future and do some things that you might not otherwise be able to.

“We decided many years ago that it was important for the company to produce as many environmentally friendly fabrics as our customers could use while also looking to the future and putting considerable resources into the development of new fibers and constructions. In this instance, DuPont delivered an extraordinary new fibre which fitted perfectly into that vision.”

Shortly after the initial discussions at Outdoor Retailer, Faytex and its Chinese partner Tai Lee Textiles developed seven new prototype fabrics containing up to 100% Sorona yarns. Each construction differed substantially from the others with one, for example, offering maximum abrasion resistance and, another, a suede-like look and hand feel. Some fabrics in the collection offered dimensional interest through waffle designs or two-tone looks. They all also either duplicated or closely resembled existing Dri-Lex constructions. As Ms Stangl observes, “We tried to anticipate our customers’ various needs with these new Sorona-based products, so the variety of looks is intentional. We were also pleasantly surprised at the brilliant colors we were able to produce.”



All the models in Naya's latest boot range feature Sorona-based linings.

CREDIT: NAYA

Because so many existing and potential Dri-Lex customers exhibit at the Outdoor Retailer show in Salt Lake City, Ms Stangl decided the best opportunity to test the viability of the new fabrics quickly was to have a larger presence at that show. Her strategy was to be in the same hall as DuPont so they could play off of each other and tell the Sorona story more effectively. Did it work? “Although the interest was there and we had some good conversations, as with any show, follow-up was crucial,” she comments.

UNEXPECTED RESISTANCE

Ms Stangl was surprised however to discover that, when they first started their sales calls following the show—as well as at subsequent trade shows—Sorona’s origins as a monomer made from fermented corn sugar was troubling to a number of executives at the companies being called on. Frankly, it was discouraging and, unfortunately, these were the people charged with bringing new sustainable fabrics into their respective companies. One company in particular, which was publicly on a mission to make its products as ‘green’ as possible, rejected out of hand the concept of making fibers and fabrics from foodstuff.

To introduce Sorona, DuPont had initiated an aggressive marketing campaign that prominently featured corn as the source of its fibers. Even though the corn was ‘dent’ corn used primarily to feed livestock and, once the sugar was removed, it went back to its original purpose, the image of taking food from the ‘mouths of babes’ was difficult to overcome. In one instance, a year later, after countless discussions, Ms Stangl says that it has become apparent that they

cannot overcome this erroneous thought process at that particular company. Companies that heard the story and were initially hesitant to adopt Sorona-based fabrics proved, however, to be in the minority. Over the past year, more than a dozen footwear brands have placed orders, some for production and others to start a development process with the first shoes appearing at retail this past spring and summer.



The upper of this ankle boot by Palladium is made entirely from Sorona-based fabrics. CREDIT: PALLADIUM

“What we discovered at some forward-thinking smaller brands were people who wanted to make a difference and an environmental statement with their footwear. Visionaries such as Udi Shiloah at Palladium and Asher Clark at Terra Plana saw that these new fabrics made sense on a number of levels. First, they realized they weren’t sacrificing anything since these Dri-Lex constructions performed as well as or better than most other polyester or nylon-based fabrics in abrasion resistance and durability tests. The hand feel also gave them a product advantage at retail as soon as the customer picked up the shoe and felt the lining. Finally, they had the ability to use Sorona’s sustainability feature to tell a ‘green’ story if they so chose.” In fact, after the initial round of sales meetings, Ms Stangl soon came to realize that the value of this new fibre in the company’s various constructions was not just that it was environmentally friendly, but that it has the potential to perform to a high standard in everything from athletic footwear to fashionable urban chukka boots.

EXCLUSIVITY

Ms Stangl is quick to credit DuPont with some of Faytex’s early success as this was an untested product in the footwear category. With lengthy lead times in the development and production cycles, she was concerned that DuPont would not have the patience to stay the course until firm orders materialized. Although those received have been small thus far, the encouraging sign is that Sorona-based fabrics have been specified for spring and autumn 2012 salesmen’s samples. “When the brands tell this story to the retail community and they in turn tell it to their customers, we believe that sell through will be strong, especially to eco conscious consumers.” She goes on to say that, “Because of DuPont’s willingness to grant us exclusivity for one year, we have been able to approach potential customers in a measured and systematic way and then create fabrics that responded to conversations with them. We are in the business of helping our customers sell shoes and think these Sorona-based products provide extra value and will do exactly that.”



This style called Ra by Terra Plana combines a leather upper with a Sorona-based lining. CREDIT: TERRA PLANA

PRICING AND PROMISE

Ms Stangl feels that for too many years and at far too many footwear brands, the higher price of recycled, renewable and sustainable components-including linings-has been used as an excuse not to buy. She likens it to a classic ‘Catch 22’ situation where with high volume orders, costs will come down but, without them, pricing will remain high and may move even higher as raw material prices escalate. Those brands bold enough to spend the extra pennies per pair on environmentally friendly fabrics may now unfortunately never see lower

prices unless joined by enough others to reach a tipping point. And that is exactly where Faytex finds itself with regard to these Sorona-based fabrics.

Although the price of Sorona fibers has gone up over the past year, the actual cost impact per pair of shoes is actually very small. In fact, Ms Stangl goes so far as to say that, "Should some of the larger footwear brands begin to order in volume we can almost guarantee price reductions as the cost of Sorona-based fabrics will inch closer to those of virgin polyester. Price will not be the factor it is now, and the planet will be just a little bit greener."

Indeed, she observes that, "At the end of the day, if we're not thinking about our children, their children and future generations then we're really not doing our part are we? The history of the green movement is loaded with failure at consumer level and I can understand the hesitancy of some brands to keep on experimenting. But we're getting closer to the point where making the decision to specify eco-friendly fabrics is a no-brainer."

Recent comments from one of the above-named big shoe brands will encourage her. Asher Clark, had this to say about using the new fabric in the Terra Plana brand of shoes: "We like to use the Dri-lex Sorona fabric because it performs better than any lining we have ever used and we really respect the company's commitment to performance and sustainability." For Terra Plana, Clark places great emphasis on sustainable design, adapting the mantra of the three Rs: reduce, re-use and recycle. Examples include using no glue in some of the designs and instead stitching a sole straight onto a chrome-free leather upper. Clearly, Sorona also has a part to play in this.

In the meantime, Faytex will continue to add to its extensive range of green fabrics featuring Sorona as well as those with Repreve recycled polyester content and remains confident that it will be in a position to deliver the right product at the right time for all its customers. In itself, Sorona does indeed appear to be an exceptionally good fibre in terms of performance and foot comfort. Its sustainability is also to be welcomed, for as long as corn is grown to feed livestock, the raw material will be readily available to produce it at no loss to either the human or farming food chains, unlike its use in bio-fuels.

.. .as a matter of fact ...

While Dri-Lex fabrics are engineered to provide various performance features depending on application they are all designed to manage moisture within a shoe environment to keep the surface of the foot dry and comfortable. To achieve this, they combine fibre content, yarn features and fabric construction with hydrophilic {water loving} components.

The actual movement of water {hydrophilic action} works through a combination of absorption, adsorption, wicking and rapid drying capabilities resulting from the inherent nature of the fibers involved. These properties are permanently built into the yarns and micro environments created in the structure and will not wash or wear away in use.

To achieve the best levels of performance possible, Faytex has strategic alliances with top fiber and fabric innovators which enable it to incorporate a wide range of valuable technologies. These include:

Aegis Microbe Shield for resistance to a broad range of bacteria, fungi and algae Cambrelle non-woven fabric for overall toughness and resistance to abrasion Cordura highly durable fabrics in a variety of weights, constructions and textures Repreve nylon and polyester yarns with certified recycled content.