

Logo identification on leather has been possible for many years but now computer-based technology has added a new dimension for brand holders to explore. First limited by leather type, then by size and colour of image, digital printing of leather has made massive, fresh advances, and is no longer bound by the earlier limitations. One of the key features of a new system is its ability to print images of 40 square feet in size. Others are its flexibility and immediacy: the system gives designers a new focus.

Any image, any colour



If customisation is going to make the inroads into the industry which are predicted for it, then the digitised printing of leather should help speed the process. Team shoes could be easily colour or design co-ordinated, golf gloves similarly. One can envisage that the women's golf business could become even more seasonal than at present. With more and more clothing companies targeting the golf business, shoes and bags can be produced to match the season's hottest fabric designs with ease. For that matter, golf bags and matching head covers could be produced for international tournaments and, if golf makes its appearance again as an Olympic sport, national team bags could be produced to match the clothing designs. The system now available means that minimum quantities are no longer an issue. Nor is the lead time factor of over-riding consequence.

Since launching its revolutionary digital printing process for leather late last year, the UK company of Trenchant-Browne has made further strides in bringing the system to the market and has been trialling its process with a briefcase full of top designers in fashion, accessories, footwear and furnishing.

The company has its roots in large format, digital printing and ink technology, far removed from the ordinary reproduction of A3 size colour photocopy images which are inevitably affected by the colour of the tanned leather. With an expertise in computing, using existing and bespoke software had enabled the company to print photographic quality images up to 40 sq.ft in size. The image can be produced as a one-off or repeated with colour and image variations exactly to a client's specifications. The challenge was to translate this ability on to the more difficult and individual substrate of leather.

Two years of research and development has been involved in getting to the point where the company believes it can now offer the highest quality and most durable leather printing process the industry has yet seen.

Trenchant-Browne has recently generated the equipment to cover 40 sq.ft of leather at a single pass, which represents a major advance in the technology. And the system can work on both chrome and veg tanned leathers and on a variety of substrate thicknesses. Fine tuning of its computer software has allowed the company to colour profile images to the colour of the leather being printed on - when the system was first launched, natural or white veg tanned leather only was preferred. The company's Kaxtan system delivers a 1400dpi image of exceptionally detailed quality and the ability to change colour and enhance any original concept through the computer is straightforward.

Because of the power of the computer, the company is also able to create images which will compensate for any distortion in the manufacture of essentially three-dimensional products. The distortion, for instance, which takes place when stretching leather over the toe-cap section of a shoe can be allowed for so that the finished design maintains consistency in all parts of the shoe. The image can also be printed on to the leather to match the needs of the pattern maker so that only those areas of leather which need to be are printed. For the clothing







manufacturer, it means that the individual parts of the garment can be printed so that checks and stripes match when the garment is assembled.

Simple - if you know how

The process is essentially very simple. An image - any image - is generated in the computer and sent via a RIP to a large format inkjet. The ink, a suspended reactive pigment, is held in place by a combination of drying agents and then pressurised into the leather, which is then left to cure. Finally, the leather is cleaned and is now ready for whatever finishing is desired. The process leaves the image permanently secured in the leather with results comparable to printing on paper. Early testing has been completed by SATRA, the international technology and testing centre, with excellent results attained in all areas.

Trenchant-Browne intends to make the process available to as many end users as possible through licensing its technology. With the huge market potential which the company has identified in the leather manufactured goods industry, it is quite likely that designers will see leather as flexible a substrate as textiles, with a response time which would allow them to produce fresh collections at any time to match retail demands.

David Buirski