Boosted by the results of an academic study that presents Modal as having a low environmental impact, manufacturer Lenzing has decided to market the fibre in a new way, emphasising its environmental efficiency as well as its softness.



Move to reposition the Modal brand

Cellulose fibre manufacturer Lenzing has announced a repositioning of its Modal brand to reflect a change in the production process, and to emphasise the fibre's sustainability.

Like other Lenzing fibres, Modal is produced from the pulp of beech trees. However, a new step in the production process, bleaching with oxygen, has led the Austrian firm to come up with a new name for its method of making the fibre. It will now use the term Edelweiss technology to describe the production process for Modal. The company will now use the slogan 'CO_2-neutral softness by Edelweiss technology' to market the fibre. The edelweiss flower is a well known symbol of the Alps and of freshness and purity.

References to CO_2-neutral come from a lifecycle analysis of Modal and other Lenzing cellulosic fibres that the University of Utrecht carried out for the Austrian manufacturer in 2008. The study's main conclusion was that "modern man-made cellulose fibres" offer good potential for the makers of fibres, yarns, fabrics and finished garments to reduce their environmental impact, compared to using cotton and petrochemical synthetic fibres. Although Lenzing commissioned the study, it's important to point out that it underwent peer-review by academics from the University of Manchester, from the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Heidelberg, and from Michigan Technological University. The company has waited until now to make the findings of the study more public because it ties in with and will help the move to differentiate its Modal in a market which in recent years has become more competitive. For years, Lenzing was the only producer of Modal but now that competitors products are on the market, too, it has decided to make sustainability the core of its argument.

Modal was one of four Lenzing fibres to feature in the study, along with polyester and polypropylene, but the study also made a distinction between the fibres the Austrian company produces on home soil and those it makes in factories in Asia. It measured the environmental impact of each, looking at factors including climate change, ozone layer depletion, human toxicity, land use, water use, fresh water ecotoxicity, terrestrial ecotoxicity, and acidification. The Utrecht team gave each fibre a score for each of eleven categories in total and

A beechwood in Austria, source of the Modal fibre.

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weighted in various ways to give a series of single scores for each fibre.

Two of the scores assume all the categories are of equal importance, with the difference between the two being the use in one instance of a set of "normalisation factors" that academics in the Netherlands devised in 2000 to calculate lifecycle analysis. The third score does not assume that all eleven categories are of equal importance. It uses a weighting system devised by the Dutch Oil and Gas Exploitation and Production Association, in which categories such as climate change and human toxicity, for example, have a much higher importance in calculating lifecycle analysis than, say, ozone layer depletion.

Under each of the methods of measurement, Modal scores well. In all three variations, Modal has the third-lowest environmental impact, very slightly behind the viscose that Lenzing makes in Austria and, with the lowest impact of all, the Tencel it will make in its newly built facility in Upper Austria. Using one of the methods (the first in which all 11 criteria carry the same weight), the viscose fibre Lenzing manufacturers in Asia has the highest environmental impact of all. Under the other two methods, in which there is a weighting for the criteria, cotton has a higher environmental impact than any other fibre.

"Lenzing Modal is much more than simply soft," said marketing director, Andreas Dorner, at the time of the announcement. "We wish to pay tribute to this fact and reposition the brand. Expanding the fibre's image from softness to eco-friendliness mirrors the changes in the demands from the marketplace. Today customers not only seek a high-quality product. They want to be sure that it was produced in a fair and eco-friendly way."



Modal fibre is, according to Lenzing, carbon neutral and up to 95% of processing chemicals are recovered during production.

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