RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: SAFE TO SEA



Like charity, corporate social responsibility can also begin at home. It did for this project, in which global group Inditex (parent company of Zara and other fashion brands) lent its support to a small, local research and development company in Galicia, north-west Spain. The result is a special safety suit that will allow Galician fishermen to work comfortably and improve the chances of survival in the event of falling overboard.

Clothing group sponsors safety suit for fishermen

Galician research and development company Scio IT has unveiled an "ocean safety system" encompassing clothing and communications technology designed to save lives in 'man overboard' accidents on small fishing boats.

Global clothing group Inditex, parent company of Zara, sponsored the project and hosted a launch event for the system, Safe to Sea, at its headquarters in A Coruña in north-west Spain towards the end of 2012. Now the system, which has undergone extensive testing, is ready for roll-out and the crews of small vessels based in Galicia's fishing ports are preparing to wear it in the line of duty.

Clothing in the system comprises easy-to-use, ergonomic gear including a special exposure suit to allow fishermen to do their work unimpeded. It is the result of six years' research and development by Scio IT, in conjunction with two Galician universities, those of A Coruña and Vigo.

Gear gets in the way

It is designed for use on any type of ship, fishing boat or leisure craft, but according to the company, the system will prove especially useful for the crews of small fishing boats, which account for 90% of 'man overboard' incidents due to the type of work they perform. At the launch event, Jaime Casals, Scio IT's chief

executive, said: "Safe to Sea is designed for use by the boats that account for 80% of Spain's fishing fleet, small vessels with few crew-members, on which fishermen sometimes choose not to use safety gear because it gets in the way of their ability to do their jobs."

An integrated device on the ship's control panel constantly monitors the electronic sensor system inside the suit worn by each crew-member. The sensor can also be fitted to a belt. This personal electronic system sends an alarm signal when a crew-member falls overboard. It also triggers automatic inflation of a life vest within two seconds to keep the sailor afloat until he can be rescued.

As soon as the crew-member goes overboard, the ship's control panel guides the crew to his exact location. If there is no other crew-member onboard the vessel (some intrepid souls sometimes work the seas on their own), the system automatically issues an alert over integrated VHF radio to nearby ships and ocean rescue authorities.



The Safe To Sea suit triggers a self-inflating life-vest and an electronic alert that a crew-member is in the water.

Scio IT



Small fishing boats, with only one or two crew-members, experience the highest number of 'man overboard' incidents.

Scio IT

An idea for saving lives

After attending the event at Inditex's headquarters, Spain's development minister, Ana Pastor, described the idea as a small project with the potential to make a big impact. "This can help save a lot of lives," she said. The president of the regional government of Galicia, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, Inditex president, Pablo Isla, and representatives of 40 fishermen's associations from different parts of Galicia were also in attendance. The minister praised all the partners involved for working closely together on the idea and for the rigorous approach they took to testing the technology. The system meets ISO standards and has already secured international patents.

Tests took place under the auspices of Spain's national training centre for saving lives at sea, based at Jovellanos in the neighbouring region of Asturias. Spain takes safety at sea seriously; its mainland and main island groups comprise 23 coastal provinces with a combined coastline of almost 8,000 kilometres. The national maritime safety agency was involved in emergency situations involving more than 13,000 people in the course of 2011. It currently has a fleet of 73 lifeboats and 11 helicopters.

Ms Pastor, whose ministerial responsibility includes safety at sea, said during the event at Inditex headquarters that the clothing company had set a fine example in corporate social responsibility by supporting the Safe To Sea project. She described the initiative as proof that, in spite of an ongoing deep economic crisis, Spain still has its fair share of "magnificent professional people with good ideas".

Material concerns

Scio IT's Jaime Casals is at pains to point out that the key elements of the Safe To Sea system are that the technology can be incorporated into whatever clothing the fishermen find comfortable and ergonomic to wear. He insists there have been safety suits in the past that crew-members have preferred not to use when out at sea because of perceived restrictions in their movement that the clothing has caused, preventing them from working comfortably and effectively. "For us, it's not the material that matters," he says. "We can work with anything. The communications technology and the self-inflating life-vest can go into just about anything that the fishermen find comfortable."

To emphasise the point, he makes it clear that Inditex brought none of its textile, design and garment-making expertise to the Safe To Sea project. The group limited itself to providing crucial economic support. Over the course of its six-year development, the project has absorbed around €3 million and Inditex contributed one-third of that total, with other funding coming from the European Union and regional and national government budgets in Spain.

Support will be ongoing. Of an estimated implementation cost of €3,300 for each crew of one or two men, European Union funding will pay more than 60% of the bill, or around €2,000. To cement its commitment to helping fishing communities in its home region, Inditex will pay half of the remaining €1,300.



Jaime Casals of Scio IT presents the Safe To Sea system as (left to right) development minister, Ana Pastor, the president of the parliament of Galicia, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, and Inditex president, Pablo Isla, look on.

Inditex

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