A road map going somewhere



Nike - one of a number of major companies commited to a Joint Roadmap towards zero discharge of hazardous chemicals.

Nike

What is the similarity between a preacher and a road sign? They both point the way forward but it doesn't necessarily mean that they will follow. A bit of an old joke — but there are many environmental lobbyists who might qualify as the preacher. One of the most vocal is Greenpeace, which has the knack of creating the impression that only it occupies the moral high ground and only through its efforts will the planet be saved and all toxic chemicals be removed. Many might disagree and could include those companies and communities that have suffered as a result of lobbying organisations' campaigns that have turned out to be flawed — but only after the damage has been done.

The fact is that in the late 20th century, and certainly in the 21st century, there are many companies that have developed their own road map programmes to remove toxic chemicals from being used by their suppliers and/or in their production processes. At the same time, they do not have the luxury of being able to snipe from the sidelines, free from their responsibilities to their employees and the wellbeing of the communities within which they operate. Or even the necessity of generating profits.

WSA has been watching the latest public spat, in which Greenpeace has extrapolated from the production methods of two Chinese textile companies that count some of the big brands among their customers. By extrapolation, the focus for the lobbyists' campaign has been on the brands. By similar methods of broad, and sometimes disconnected, extrapolation it could be argued that the pensions of activists are being financed by the success of the brands they attack.

There is some satisfaction to be taken from a statement issued by adidas, one of the brands targeted most recently by Greenpeace. As far as the global brand is concerned, it has been working to establish a safer, greener and more sustainable supply chain without any 'help' from the lobbyists. It is clearly not alone.

"We recognise that the goal of 'Zero Discharge' demands the collective action of industry, regulators and other stakeholders," states the company. "We believe that the elimination of hazardous chemicals does not only need collaboration and partnership with our industry peers, but also a holistic and integrated approach."

There is now an industry Joint Roadmap toward Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals and the companies involved with this initiative include Nike, Puma, Li Ning, C&A and H&M, as well as the adidas Group. The latter has published a detailed individual roadmap that it is contributing to the joint plan.

Far more complex than a glib slogan

In the real world, a company such as adidas works with more than 1,200 contract factories in no less than 69 countries around the globe. While the company may support the idealism of Greenpeace, it has to work within a complex and tiered network of material and chemical suppliers, agents, buyers and distributors. As the company points out, material and chemical suppliers, as well as dyeing and finishing facilities, are shared among dozens of other international brands in the sporting goods, fashion and retail industries. Working through such a complex structure, the micro-management of a multi-layered supply chain is an extraordinary challenge and one that cannot be solved with the wave of a banner at an international football match.

The same is true of the other global players and it would be difficult to find a chemical company that has as its mission statement to supply hazardous or toxic chemicals to an unsuspecting consumer.

Sustainable practices and global supply chains

Long before the current Greenpeace campaign, the adidas Group had established a strong track record in running leadership programmes that have reduced and minimised the use of chemicals in its products and along its supply chain. It is worth detailing some of its achievements. In 2000, the company was a pioneer in the phasing out of PVC materials from its products. In the same year the company kicked off the VOC 2000 initiative to significantly reduce volatile organic compounds in athletic footwear manufacturing. By using innovative bonding and cementing systems, for instance, the VOC content per pair was reduced from around 140g/pair in 1999 to 25g/pair in 2010.

By the time that the EU initiative known as REACH, concerning the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, came into play in mid-2007, the comprehensive restrictive substances policy for product materials that adidas had in place was nine years old. It effectively prohibited the use of chemicals considered as harmful or toxic. The policy not only covered the strictest local requirements, but it also included best practice standards as recommended by consumer organisations.



Adidas' global corporate headquarters in Herzogenaurach, Germany. Last year the company responded to the 'Detox' campaign and approached other international apparel brands, to help develop and coordinate an approach that they believe will meet Greenpeace's challenge.

adidas Group

The company also expected its business partners to take a proactive stance in improving the environmental impact of the materials they supply. Improving the environmental impact means ensuring that materials and components supplied are non-toxic in use and disposal and their use in manufactured products does not involve toxic releases or damage to ecosystems.

The company policy is regularly reviewed and updated in consultation with non-governmental organisations (including Greenpeace). Adherence to this policy by material suppliers is strictly checked by external auditing institutes.

With the launch of its Environmental Strategy 2015, a detailed environmental sourcing policy was rolled out by adidas; this happened at the end of 2009. It's built on in-depth risk assessments of suppliers at different tiers in the supply chain and the use of tailored tools for factory assessments and performance rating. In 2010, nearly 100 environmental audits were conducted across its supply chain, with mills and dye-houses primary targets for these environmental audits.

The whole question of sustainability, protection of the environment and the safety of consumers is clearly taken seriously by major corporations around the world. These concepts need to be carried out in such a way that the livelihoods of people are not jeopardised through precipitate action. It seems that the players in the global market had seen this particular road sign and road map a long while ago. While standards can always be improved, at least they are not standing still and just pointing the way forward. They are actually travelling the road to a safer future.