GAME CHANGERS: NICK SMITH, COVESTRO

In this new section, we are running a series of detailed conversations with industry figures who are involved first hand in technical innovation, new design ideas, environmental projects and other initiatives that are certain to make an impact on the wider outdoor and sports sectors. The series begins with an exchange with Nick Smith, global head of textile coatings at polymer producer Covestro.

Good products and safer factories

Where are you from and what is the path that led you to the job you do now?

I come from Birmingham, England. I would say that the path that has led me to the job I do today is my own curiosity and willingness to take on new challenges. I joined Covestro, formerly Bayer MaterialScience, as only my second job, two years after my graduation in chemistry. Covestro provides many opportunities for those with hunger for development, being a global multinational that serves diverse markets and applications with its portfolio of polyurethane and polycarbonate, and I have taken full profit from those opportunities, having lived and worked for the company in the UK, Germany, Spain, India and now China.

My current role in China is proving to be one of the most exciting so far, partly because it has brought me into the textiles industry, an industry that fascinates me, a world unto itself. The corporate mission of Covestro is 'To make the world a brighter place'; we address with our technology the great challenges that society is facing, such as urbanisation, population growth and dwindling resources, and this mission is particularly apt to the textiles industry because it is also in a period of great transformation.

What does your job involve?

I am responsible for the global business of Covestro in textile coatings. We offer a wonderful portfolio of waterborne polyurethane coatings resins for the enhancement and transformation of textiles, a deep know-how in their use in applications as diverse as sport, fashion, automotive and industrial, and perhaps most important of all, an unparalleled curiosity and willingness to work closely with industry players from all along the value chain to help them make their products better. My job is, therefore, to determine the direction and ensure the co-ordination of the work of a team of experts whose functions range from new product development, application



Nick Smith likes the fact that Covestro provides many opportunities "for those with hunger for development".

Covestro

development, marketing and business development. I am hands-on; I spend as much time as I can in the market with customers and downstream players in order to help build up our business, as well as my perspective of what is going on.

Which piece of innovation from your company in the last 12 months would you highlight in an elevator pitch to a key client?

We launched in June 2015 our new product Impranil eco, the latest product in the INSQIN family. INSQIN waterborne PU coatings enhance or transform textiles enabling more comfort, better design or even new manufacturing possibilities, and all that with a new level of sustainability. The elimination of solvents from the common textile coating processes removes occupational health risks, removes environmental pollution risks and also reduces strongly the consumption of water (by 95%) and energy (by 50%). With Impranil eco, we achieve all the same benefits in the processing of the polyurethane, but in this case with a polyurethane that was made with a very high content of renewable carbon, up to 65%. This means a significant reduction in the carbon footprint due to the reduced number of process steps.

This is a great example of how chemistry can help industry meet environmental challenges and business needs. Innovation in the chemistry and material side of the value chain has major, productive impact throughout the whole value chain - not just at the material level.

Finished product companies want the benefits of innovation but seem to expect not to have to pay for them. Discuss.

From my perspective, innovation, by definition, must have a commercial value either to the innovator or to his customer. In this case, for the finished product company it has to make the product more attractive to consumers or it has to make it cheaper to manufacture. The other possibility, that the innovation might make the company itself more attractive to consumers but does not necessarily benefit the product, is definitely one that is more difficult for companies to reconcile but, at the same time, brand owners are faced with an increasing demand from consumers, regulators and pressure groups to offer 'better' products where innovation is key. Such driving forces will in many cases propel brands to view in a different way the balance between innovation, cost, value and competitive position. It has to do with the priorities of each company. What I would wish for, as a representative of an innovation company, is more willingness for *investment* in innovation, by which I mean that the customer accepts at the beginning a less-than-optimal return for the innovative product or service in exchange for a greater return later as economies of scale, for example, are established. Covestro's Partner Manufacturer Program seeks to play a meaningful role to synergise needs for various players throughout the value chain.



New waterborne textile coating processes that Covestro has developed can help manufacturers of materials for shoe uppers or apparel reduce water consumption by up to 95% and energy by 50%. The company says it is also changing manufacturing by making factories solvent-free and safer for the people who work in them.

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If you could only pursue one sport or outdoor activity, which would it be?

I have been running for many years. Why do I love running? Because I can run in company, or I can run alone. With a minimum of kit and a minimum of time, and wherever I am, I can run. I like to run early in the morning, and when I do, I have extra energy all day long. And not to mention that there's nothing better to get the mind clear.

Which piece of kit or clothing connected with this activity is your favourite?

I love running shoes. I have lots of pairs of shoes and each one is slightly different when you get out on the road. First there's the feel of the road through the sole - it's amazing to me how many different possibilities there are. And then there's the upper and how it treats the foot. Again there's a huge variety. Which ones I prefer depends on the day.

And if you could move on immediately afterwards to one bar or restaurant (anywhere in the world) to unwind, which one would you choose?

Well, I am a big fan of food and wine, and one of the things I most enjoy is just the variety that exists – therefore, by asking me to choose you put me in a very difficult position. I could say that I especially admire the reliance on quality materials that exists in Japanese or Spanish food, for instance, but also the art in the combination use of spices in Indian food, and the sheer diversity of Chinese food. But of course, there's a special place in my heart for a British roast lunch on a winter Sunday.

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