GAME CHANGERS: DR RÜDIGER FOX

Sharing is caring

Major sports brands have publicly announced their intention to phase out unsustainable materials and toxic chemicals by 2020. This deadline puts pressure on the suppliers of materials and chemicals. Dr Rüdiger Fox, who joined German membrane technology developer Sympatex as CEO in July 2016, believes it is time to stop talking and to start taking action.

As a newcomer to the textile industry, what was your approach when you took on this new position at Sympatex?

I joined the company last year, the same year I turned 50, a time when one takes stock personally and professionally. My first goal was to take a look at the bigger picture. The World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report opened my eyes to some of the major challenges we are facing with regards to climate change, access to clean water, extreme weather events and social instability. We all know that the textile industry uses water in great quantities, and toxic chemistry, and generates a lot of waste.

What are the first steps Sympatex is taking to become climate neutral?

In January 2017, we launched a programme to offset our CO_2 emissions by planting trees through a partnership with Climate Partner. We will continue this approach until we have developed a bio-based membrane, a project we are currently working on. The Sympatex membrane is made from polyester. Compared to other waterproof, breathable membranes, ours consumes less water and we recycle our own waste, which results in water savings of up to 95% and energy savings of 60% compared to a non-recycled film.

Do you see recycling as the main solution to reduce the environmental impact of the company's activities?

Certainly not; our intention is not to recycle but to up-cycle. The technologies available today may not enable us to close the loop completely, but any step taken in that direction is a positive one. If we can recycle 50% of what we make, that is better than nothing. One area in which I think change is possible, and not too difficult, is to stop choosing fabrics made in blends of all



Dr. Rudiger Fox joined Sympatex after more than 25 years of management experience at international companies in the automotive, telecommunications and aviation industries. Since 2016, he has been a member of the advisory board of B Lab Europe, part of the B Corporation movement.

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sorts of yarns to make recycling possible at the product's end of life. We cannot keep on making materials that stay hundreds of years in nature. We need to feed used materials back into the supply chain.

What measures is Sympatex taking to phase out non-recyclable materials?

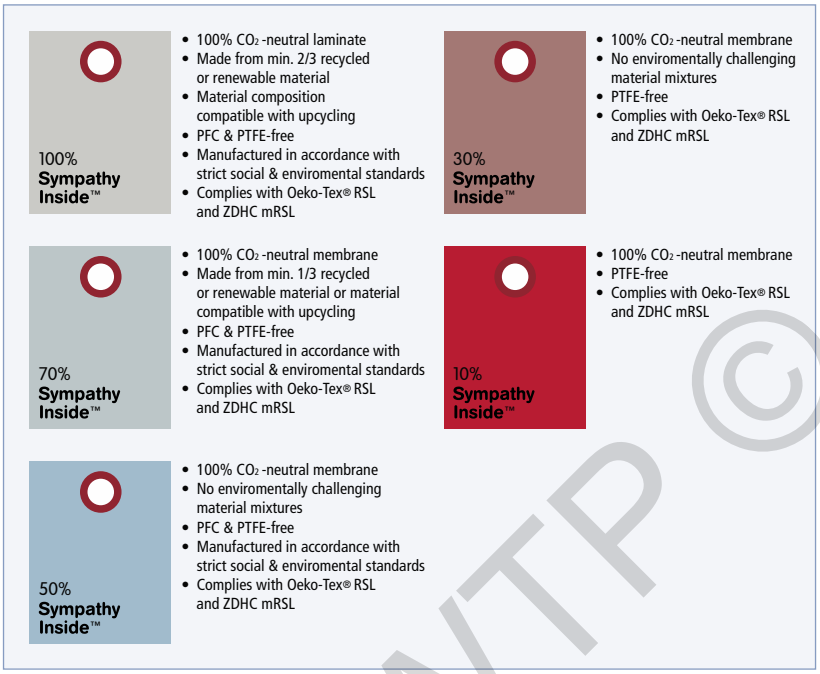
We have launched a new labelling programme that is designed to be easy to understand and as transparent as possible, so that consumers can make educated choices. We are introducing a system of five classes of laminates. It starts with 100% 'Sympathy Inside', meaning the best available environmental practices, and has several intermediary levels: 75%, a fair rate; 50%, which we consider acceptable; 30%, which we see as borderline; and 10%, which is unacceptable. By 2020, all our products will be in one of the top three levels. We will phase out all products rated 10% by next year and all products in the 30% range by 2020.

You have said that you want to create an open-source platform for sustainability within the industry; how do you see that taking shape?

We believe that the challenges the textile industry faces to become environmentally sustainable are much bigger than a single company can bear and that it is also our responsibility to share our insights to accelerate the process. We have therefore started to communicate publicly the steps we plan to take and the solutions we have developed. We encourage every partner, client and competitor to follow and copy these. In addition, we invite all interested parties to join our 'Sympathy Lab', a virtual collaboration space to develop environmentally friendly solutions, until we have fully closed the apparel loop.

Sympatex seems not just to be actively working to reduce its environmental footprint but also calling out false eco-claims, as the company did with Gore-Tex earlier this year. How damaging is 'greenwashing' to the outdoor industry?

Any form of 'greenwashing' is one of the biggest dangers to the credibility of our industry. Not only does social media today help reveal them rapidly, but each case also has a ripple effect on all other players, including those that are seriously attempting to instigate real change. For good reason, consumers are sceptical, and if the general perception is that the industry doesn't take the challenge seriously and address its full scope, we will not create the market forces for change to happen. This could lead to resignation among consumers. In light of the millions of tonnes of apparel made and sold every year, generating huge amounts of water consumption and pollution, any greenwashing risks killing the single asset we have: consumers' trust that we can find a solution together.



The different levels of "eco-sympathy", as defined by Sympatex's new product range organisation. The two lowest levels, 30% and 10%, will be the first to be phased out.

Sympatex

The outdoor industry has been slow to adopt non-PFC waterproof-breathable materials and DWR finishes, in part because of their low oil repellency. This industry is used to promoting high performance in their products, do you think it is possible to change this practice?

In the first place, we need to have an open discussion about industry values at all levels, from manufacturers to consumers, all the concerned parties. As a principle, it is hard to accept that the need for added 'comfort' performance justifies spoiling the world we will leave for future generations, be it because of toxicity, pollution, or just the overconsumption of resources. I think it is now in the public domain and generally accepted that the focus on performance in this market has led in most cases to largely excessive performance levels. We are not talking about an existential need when we ask for oil repellency.

Do you think the market is ready to engage in the changes you recommend?

It is our view that the market has started to seek more differentiation, especially in the past months. Performance is now a given and the next battle for market share will be won by those that differentiate themselves in this new 'blue ocean' of environmental responsibility. We believe that change can happen fast, but we know we cannot do this alone, we need everybody to participate.

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