

FOOTWEAR TECHNOLOGY: AKU & GRUPPO DANI

Italian outdoor footwear brand Aku, a long-term partner of prominent leather producer Gruppo Dani, was the first shoe producer to use Dani's 'Zero Impact' leather in its products as part of a wider drive to become more sustainable.

Aku makes the most of Zero Impact leather

It's five years since footwear group Aku decided at an internal meeting to make sustainability strategic to the future of its business. This has meant working to improve everything it does, explains product manager Giulio Piccin, while finding ways of reducing its impact on the environment.

He specifies three areas on which the Montebelluna-based brand has focused in its work to make this vision a reality: product, operations and community (internal and external). Mr Piccin co-ordinates all of this for the company and says sharing details with key suppliers has also been an important element.

When Aku began to share its ideas with one supplier, leather producer Gruppo Dani, it was clear from the outset that the tanning group was already on a similar path. "In fact, Gruppo Dani had decided long before us to be sustainable in order to be competitive," Giulio Piccin says, "so it was a good thing to be able to share ideas."

Zero Impact

Based in the famous leather-producing town of Arzignano, Dani brought a number of sustainability strands together in April of last year and presented a project called Zero Impact to the market. It chose a furniture fair, the Salone del Mobile exhibition in Milan, for the launch and immediately announced three high-end Italian furniture manufacturers, Désirée, Gamma and Living Divani, as early adopters of Zero Impact leather. Away from this, however, Aku was in the process of reaching an exclusive agreement with the leather supplier to become the first footwear user of Zero Impact.

Can't see the carbon for the trees

Zero Impact is the result of ten years' research, aimed, as Giulio Piccin suggests, at reducing environmental impact at every production stage along the way. For example, detailed work to



measure the carbon emissions of its leathers allowed Gruppo Dani to reduce those emissions by 5%. Zero Impact leather is chrome- and heavy metal-free and complies with the specification ISO15987, which requires that the sum of all the heavy metal contained in the leather must not exceed 0.1%. The company has developed new heavy metal-free tanning technology, based on the use of enzymes and polysaccharides. It says the new system produces leather with the same physical and mechanical characteristics as leather processed using more widespread production methods. Major technological innovations it points to on the road to Zero Impact tanning also include an oxidative unhairing operation that uses hydrogen peroxide within a special polypropylene drum.

The Bellamont Plus boot has an outsole containing recycled rubber, a midsole with recycled EVA and coconut and bamboo fibre in the footbed. The uppers are made from Zero Impact leather from Gruppo Dani.

 Aku

*The tide has turned for
Aku and for leather
supplier Gruppo Dani.
Sustainability is the
path to success.*

 Aku



A range of footwear with leather developed using new heavy metal-free tanning technology has caught the attention of consumers in important markets such as Germany.

 Aku

Taking this a stage further, with the launch of the Zero Impact project, it announced that it will now offset all of its carbon emissions by helping to fund a range of reforestation projects. This led to 1,900 new trees being planted in 2015, enough to offset 2,000 tonnes of carbon emissions. Working with a specialist partner, AzzeroC02, Gruppo Dani is funding the planting of these trees at different sites in Italy.

Marta Fumei, the leather producer's communications manager, says: "Zero Impact is just for certain partners. They are all companies that are as sustainable as Gruppo Dani is. They have the same philosophy and the same mentality as we have. We view this as a way of giving them a competitive advantage."

Local supply

Back at Aku, Mr Piccin explains that his company's approach to becoming more sustainable began with examining all 15 or 20 components that make up a typical Aku hiking, trekking or mountaineering boot and examining which materials were renewable or recyclable, identifying any ways in which it could do better. Part of doing better, it realised, was to try to work with local suppliers. And this, too, confirmed Gruppo Dani as an ideal partner; Montebelluna and Arzignano are only 80 kilometres apart and are both in the Veneto region.

In terms of product, Giulio Piccin offers the Bellamont Plus model as a good example of the use to which Aku has put Zero Impact leather. A low-cut or mid-cut boot suitable for urban and activewear, the Bellamont Plus contains materials that are 99% European. The outsole contains recycled material from rubber

processing and the midsole contains recycled double-density die-cut EVA; it has coconut and bamboo fibre in the footbed. The leather, of course, is Zero Impact.

"Its metal-free status attracted us," the product manager explains. "The upper has water-repellency treatment, but it too is chrome-free. Dani offered us Zero Impact leather for the Bellamont Plus and we decided quite quickly to use this leather in the whole Plus line of products, which encompasses six models at the moment. They're the ones that share this concept and, in terms of sales, the result has been very good. Not everywhere, but in important markets such as Germany, where consumers are looking for new ideas, it's been strong."

Values matter more

He cites Hamburg-based outdoor retail group Globetrotter as having done a particularly good job to help consumers understand the difference that Zero Impact and other measures have made to the Plus line. "Globetrotter has been a great retail partner," he says. "It has allowed the customer to read about and learn about our values and what we have seen is that, for some consumers, values are more important than price."

Other benefits to have accrued from Aku's drive towards greater sustainability include improved use of energy. The company monitored the energy consumption of every machine in its factory and learned a lot about ways to save. It has also gained from a number of quite simple ideas. For example, it decided that shipments to retail customers in Italy

required less packaging than deliveries to customers in other countries; it now uses cardboard cases that it can recycle instead of an energy-greedy machine that applied shrink-wrapped plastic to shoe-boxes.

Lunch: a break with tradition

Something else that has changed is the workers' traditional 90-minute lunch-break. This has reduced to 30 minutes and now workers go home an hour earlier instead. "We held a vote on this," Mr Piccin says, "and 51% voted for the shorter lunch-break. We thought that was a small percentage for such an important change so we said we would try it for one month. At the end of that month, people voted again and this time 98% were in favour." He points out that this has meant a big saving in energy. It takes too long to warm up most of the machines in the factory if closed down at lunchtime. Closing them down an hour earlier every day, on the other hand, has been valuable.

He accepts that Aku's exclusive use (among footwear producers) of Zero Impact leather was always going to be temporary but says his company will always have a market advantage through being the first, the pioneer. It's now



engaged with Gruppo Dani in a formal lifecycle analysis of the leather, with leather chemicals suppliers taking part too. This exercise will be complete in mid-2017. "We truly believe in the project," Mr Piccin says, "and we want to keep making progress and to keep lowering the impact of our activity." 

Interior of the Dani tannery. Aku was the first footwear company to use Zero Impact leather, which tanning group Dani said from the outset was "only for certain partners".

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