

A forward stride in footwear recycling

Worldwide, some 18 billion pairs of shoes are sold each year but recycling is no easy task because each item of footwear can contain up to 80 components. Undaunted, researchers backed by funds from ECO TLC in France are approaching the challenge from a new direction. A key objective has been to devise innovative separation techniques as well as new applications for the recovered materials, according to Pailak Mzikian, head of recycling & sustainability at SOEX Textil-Vermarktungsgesellschaft in Germany. The process outlined by the guest speaker includes: sorting; shredding and metal removal; a delamination mill stage to separate materials that are stuck to each other; and zig-zag air separation to sort the input material according to density. More than one pass would be required in the final air separation chamber to achieve a clean, homogeneous raw material, Mzikian told the BIR Textiles Round-Table in Warsaw.

Through laboratory-based testing, the researchers are also looking at pulverising the outflows from this process and using binders in order to create pellets that could be tailored to the raw material requirements of various customers. One of the aims of the project is to establish by April next year a network of industries interested in using these secondary raw materials. Recruits to this network include high-profile retail chains such as H&M and Ikea, he noted.

According to Mzikian, the intention was for a processing plant to be set up at Wolfen in Germany by the end of this year and for two 100% recycled products to be created by next summer in order to prove the overall concept. It was important to address the footwear recycling issue, he told delegates, given that consumption rates were growing in developing countries such as India, where average demand currently stood at 0.6 pairs per year compared to 6.9 pairs in the USA, 4.5 in Europe and 2.6 worldwide. Some leading brands, including Nike, had adopted their own recycling initiatives but these tended to focus on their own footwear specialisms rather than on finding a solution applicable to all types of shoe and all components, Mzikian pointed out.



Textiles

A worrying tale of thefts and job losses

With theft remaining a stubborn problem and with trading conditions providing very little cause for celebration, delegates to the BIR Textiles Round-Table in Warsaw could at least enjoy the major honour bestowed on one of the sector's leading lights as well as a guest presentation which outlined a new approach to footwear recycling.

With the price of originals now beginning to fall, there was currently no shortage of challenges facing textiles recycling companies, it emerged from the latest BIR Textiles Round-Table.

Container space providers were unlikely to accept any rate reductions and unemptied boxes would possibly be seen on the streets again, while some collectors could be forced into bankruptcy, ventured BIR Textiles Division president Olaf Rintsch of Textil Recycling K&A Wenkhaus in Germany. And according to the division's general delegate Alan Wheeler of the UK's Textile Recycling Association, his members had reported that 'warehouses are full and their buyers are buying less'. The harshness of business conditions had meant that a further two TRA members had gone out of business since the spring - 'resulting in hundreds of job losses' - to add to the six established UK textile collection companies that had ceased trading in the early months of this year.

Wheeler went on to add: 'Charities need to be careful to ensure that their collectors do not build

up large debts. If I were a charity shop manager, I would be much more concerned about whether my shop is receiving regular payments and a professional service, rather than going for a new business which supposedly will be paying a few pence per kilo



Pol T'Jollyn described thefts from containers and also during house-to-house collections as 'evil'.



BIR Textiles Division president Olaf Rintsch assumed that container space providers were unlikely to accept any rate reductions.

more, but which if it were to go bankrupt could mean that the charity would be much worse off.

'Evil' practices

To add to the pressures on business, thefts of material were proving to be a persistent menace and yet there was often no follow-up when operators complained to the authorities about such incidents, according to divisional vice president Mehdi Zerroug of Framimex in France. Only a collective effort - including from the judiciary and from the victims of these activities - could succeed in stamping out the problem, he insisted in Warsaw. Reporting for Belgium, Pol T'Jollyn of NV Recutex went as far as to describe thefts from containers and also during house-to-house collections as 'evil', but acknowledged that such practices would be 'very hard to stop as long as the price for originals remains so high'. On a positive note, however, he pointed out that 'some actions have been taken' by the authorities to put a stop to this illegal activity, resulting in a number of people being 'brought to justice and convicted'.



Klaus Löwer becomes an honorary member

A member of the BIR world recycling organisation since the 1970s, Klaus Löwer of Hans Löwer Recycling in Germany concluded his familiar international market report in Warsaw by telling delegates that it would be his last now that he had decided to retire. But given his substantial contribution to the organisation, BIR Textiles Division president Olaf Rintsch admitted that he was not keen to let Löwer cut such long-standing ties and accordingly granted him honorary member status.

Löwer was elected vice president of the BIR Textiles Division in the 1980s and was its president from 1996 to 2001, subsequently becoming its honorary president. He declared himself 'overwhelmed' by this recognition from his colleagues. 'I cannot find the right words,' he confessed. 'I can only say thank you very much.'




T'Jollyn also reported that sorting company margins were 'very small', with 'no sign that this will change very soon'. Meanwhile, demand for sorted clothing from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe was 'still very strong' while wipers were continuing to attract healthy orders at stable prices, he told delegates.

In his international market report, honorary

president of the BIR Textiles Division Klaus Löwer of Hans Löwer Recycling in Germany used the example of recent experience in Japan as proof that textiles recyclers in high-wage countries were able to survive only if they worked with sorting operations in low-wage nations - despite the fact that this approach was 'environmentally counter-productive'. □

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