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Interview Frank Boehly - Launch of a fresh campaign promoting the use of genuine leather

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On 8th January 2010, the French government issued Decree No. 2010-29, which enforces the application of Article L214-1 of the Consumer Code dictating that only material of animal origin can be called leather. As this law is unilaterally enforced in France, French tanners and leather professionals suffer from unfair competition from other European countries with less stringent consumer protection laws. Frank Boehly, president of the CNC (Conseil National du Cuir), divulges how the French leather industry copes and endeavours towards an enactment of this law at the European level. The CNC represents a sector of 9,400 companies generating 25 billion euros annually, of which 10.6 billion are generated by exports.

Q: Competition between synthetic materials and leather is irritating for the global leather industry. Why was France the first country to tackle the issue of terminology?

A: The French administration is one of the fussiest in the world, and French industries complain a lot about it. However, in this case, it was very relevant to give a specific definition of what leather is. In 2010, we could not imagine the proliferation of new materials that today wrongly claim to be called leather. The worst deviation from reality is "vegan leather", since vegan labels proscribe components of any animal origin, while leather by its definition imposes the animal origin of the product.

France is not the only country giving a specific definition of leather. To my knowledge, Italy, Spain, and probably other European countries also give a definition, but it is less precise. What sets France apart is that the wrong use of the name leather can be punished with a fine.

Q: How is the law being implemented?

A: The law is enforced by the DGCCRF (General Directorate for Competition and Fraud Control), which reports to the Ministry of the Economy and controls the products that are placed on the market. The labeling of the products must indicate the composition of the product sold very precisely. For shoes, for example, the consumer must know what the top, the sole and the lining are made of. The purpose is to protect the consumer against fraudulent labeling.

Q: What is the attitude of the EU and of other countries towards this law?

A: For years, COTANCE, the organization that brings together European professional tannery/tanning organizations, has called on the European Commission to legislate on a definition of the word leather at the European level. To date, COTANCE has provided a huge amount of information to the Commission, including in January 2017, when it released a 17 pages report describing the damage to the industry and consumers caused by the lack of legislation on leather labeling. Nonetheless, the European Commission has not yet taken up this case, which demonstrates an obvious unwillingness.

Following a request from the Conseil National du Cuir (CNC) to the French Government, the latter officially demanded the European Commission legislate on the term leather in 2018. Following France's approach, other European countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal have made similar requests.

Q: To what extent does it stigmatize and jeopardize French tanners who, as you mentioned, are the sole adherents to the law?

A: The European legislation considers that if a European manufacturer produces a product in the territory of a Member State, in accordance with the law of the country in question, and the product is placed on the market in that country, it may then be exported to the other countries of the

European Union, even if one of these countries has more restrictive legislation. Therefore, France cannot oppose the importation of products whose denomination of leather does not respect the decree n ° 2010-29 which applies only in France. Consequently, there is unfair competition between French tanners and manufacturers of leather goods and other European companies implicated in leather production.

Q : What do you reckon should be done to clarify and protect the name and the reputation of leather and to make sure consumers are well informed?

A : To protect producers, manufacturers and consumers, it is essential to specify at the international level what is leather and what is not. For example, Pinatex, a primarily synthetic material, is often presented as "pineapple leather", "eco leather" or "vegan leather", which is misleading to consumers, who may wrongly interpret that they are buying a leather product.

Q : Does the CNC support/encourage the initiatives of Leather Naturally? How? What other initiatives does it take on its own account?

A: The CNC is a member of Leather Naturally and supports all its initiatives. The CNC contributed financially to Leather Natural's fundraising for its leather campaign.

For its part, the CNC collaborates with COTANCE and continues its actions with the French public authorities. In September, the CNC will request the deputies from the presidential majority to intercede again with the European Commission to instigate the adoption of a European definition of leather.

The CNC also funds a campaign for leather and leatherwork on social networks. The first campaign ran from October 2018 to May 2019 and reached an estimated 3.2 million millennials (25/35 years of age). A new campaign will start in the fall of 2019.