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BETTER TIMES

Jared Eckler, CEO of Townsend Leather, and Sarah Eckler, Senior VP, Sales and Marketing, on moving beyond the pandemic

Townsend Leather celebrated its fiftieth anniversary three years ago. The firm began as a contract finisher to the garment and shoe-making sectors, and this was its focus for the first 20 years. By the late 1980s, the firm had begun producing and marketing its own leathers, marketing direct to a range of customers. These included just about every operation that had a requirement for upholstery leather. This took the firm into providing materials for the aviation industry.

From the outset, the firm has specialised South German bull hides. These are the biggest hides in the world. They are rectangular in shape and pretty uniform in terms of shape, width, and length, with each hide being approximately 60 square feet on average, and about 80 to 100 inches long.

Townsend Leather carries out a broad range of texturing of the leather and can achieve any look or feel that the client might want. In addition to the bull hides the firm provides a wide range of other materials, such as lamb skin or deer skin.

AH: The pandemic seems to be easing off and business aviation is benefitting from the surging demand for flying private. How are things with you?

JE and SE: For the last couple of years, right through the pandemic, our challenge has been keeping up with orders. Sales were not the problem. There is plenty of demand. However, our customers require the very best materials and we had some real difficulties getting the German hides that we need.

It is a bit of a complicated story. Through COVID and the global supply chain problems including shortage of automotive semiconductors, German auto manufacturing slowed markedly. This caused a big drop in demand for leather. The German auto manufacturers really drive the market for hides. So when they are not working it takes a lot of demand out of the industry and the farmers bring on far fewer bulls. This issue was on top of the demand for meat being down overall (leather is a by-product of the meat industry); throughout the pandemic, people were staying home and not eating out in restaurants).

We are very selective here at Townsend and we only take the top 15 percent of hides. Without the support of the auto manufacturers, the farmers struggled to produce hides of the quality that we require in the quantities that we need. Farmers actually stopped raising new livestock. It takes years to bring a bull to maturity.



Another challenge was that with all the restrictions hides often sat waiting for clearance at clogged ports. However, as soon as we got product through, we processed the hides and moved them on to our customers. We have both Gulfstream and Bombardier as customers and they have a tremendous demand. Cessna has also been very busy.

However, now things are easing again and getting back to normal. We're benefitting from that and we are catching up



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fast with our order backlog. Plus, we are taking a lot of new orders. It feels great and is such a turnaround to have lead times again, instead of working from behind.

AH: I believe you have a major new product you are going to be introducing at NBAA?

JE & SE: Absolutely. We are introducing a new leather for aviation seating. A major customer has already given the product the thumbs up. We have a very natural, subtle-looking grain that we introduce into the leather and it is a great alternative to our Classic leather which is natural grain cowhide and the hardest to obtain large quantities of the right selection of hide to produce. We're calling it the Majestic Cowhide. Another bonus is the cutting yield will be superior to our natural grain cowhide.

The natural look, without any alteration or embossing, is the most difficult part of our business to find hides for in the quantities and timelines our customers are demanding right now. As you will appreciate, hides are a natural product and there is always some degree of variation from hide to hide as far as grain and texture are concerned. With our applied natural look we can achieve a far greater degree of conformity from one hide to the next. That goes down extremely well with customers since it still looks like the natural product that it is, but you don't get the wide variations that can cause difficulties for customers. The flaws are camouflaged and the hide is very easy for upholstery shops to work with.



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We have long had a wide range of textures that we introduce into the hides. That goes back decades. However, the texture we introduce into this new product enables us to upgrade the hides. It leaves them looking very natural and not overly embossed.

This new product will be very important for our customers and their designers. The OEMs and the refurbishment and completions sectors are getting busier now. We think it will enable us to use 50 percent more of the hides that we currently send out to hospitality and residential customers, giving us a considerable increase in the number of hides we can make available to business aviation customers.

AH: Your employment levels took a bit of a hit through the pandemic. Are you back to full strength now?

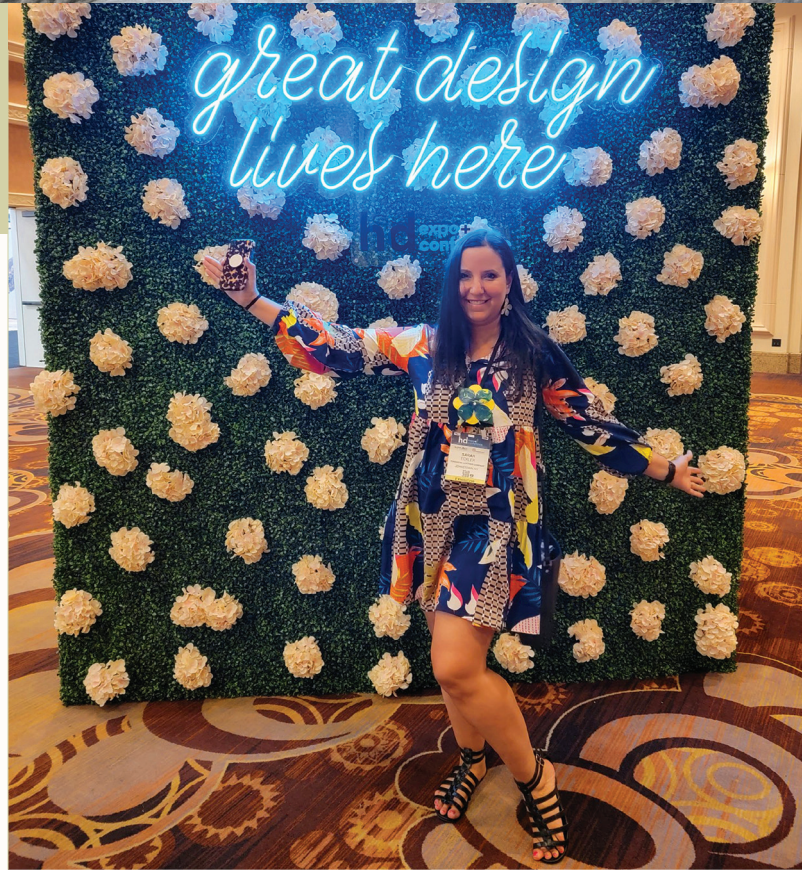
JE and SE: We are always looking for more talent. That is just a given. During COVID, hotels were struggling and few were being refurbished, which meant that our non-aviation business was down. But that is now coming back nicely. We have the right number of employees for our requirements today, but that said, probably 40 percent of them are still in training and have been with us for under a year. Their main contributions still lie ahead of us. So, we are always looking to hire good people who fit well into our company culture.

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AH: Are you seeing a surge in costs as inflation seems to be roaring ahead across the globe?

JE and SE: We are definitely seeing costs surging, particularly with respect to shipping costs. Anything to do with production is going up in price all the time. We are constantly having to talk to our customers now about a price increase, which will probably come in September. We understand that a lot of our competitors are doing the same and are facing the same cost pressures.

Customers understand that this is just the way things are now. It makes it difficult for all of us, as far as planning is concerned. Our suppliers do not hold their prices steady these days for more than a month. However, everyone is experiencing this and we all have to work with it. We are working very hard to make sure our customers continue to see the value of our hides and the care we put into every order to ensure top quality. |BAM



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