

Dirty deeds in the conveyor belt sector?

Most of us have long been aware of the increasing trade in counterfeit goods. Such activities are usually associated with famous 'designer' brands within the fashion industry. But counterfeiting is even affecting the normally unglamorous and unexciting world of conveyor belt manufacturing. *Les Williams* reports.

Les Williams,
General sales manager,
Dunlop Conveyor Belting



CONVEYOR BELT manufacturing has always been a highly competitive industry and that can only be a good thing for the end-users. But what isn't a good thing for users of conveyor belts is that we are seeing a growing trend where lower quality belts - often of very dubious origin - are being bought by some unscrupulous traders and distributors and then sold on as being manufactured by one of the relatively small number of 'big name' brands. While Dunlop Conveyor Belting can't speak for others, we are certainly victims of this practice and the problem is growing.

What is happening?

It appears that the major manufacturers are unwitting victims of these dirty deeds.

No evidence has yet been found which points to a manufacturer falsely branding its products. In other words, there is no sign of actual counterfeiting. What does seem evident, however, is that large scale 'dumping' of belting - primarily from Asia - is now taking place on an unprecedented scale. And with the trading and fitting of conveyor belts to end users worth many millions each year, it is hardly surprising to find some who are willing to deceive in order to earn bigger profits.

Rather than buy direct from the manufacturer, a large proportion of belts are purchased by end-users from traders as well as from vulcanising companies and distributors who supply and fit the belts.

This is a long standing practice and the majority of traders and distributors operate perfectly honestly. However, we are finding more and more cases where customers believe they have been supplied with genuine Dunlop belts, but which in reality have been manufactured elsewhere and are invariably of inferior quality or below the required international standards.

End-users are increasingly insisting that their belts should be made in Europe rather than, say, in Asia.

However, even this approach can be prone to malpractice with belts imported into Europe, housed in a warehouse and then re-shipped to customers using certificates that state the country of origin as being European.

Identity theft

Dunlop recently discovered that it had become a victim of another illegal practice that virtually amounts to identity theft. An organisation in India (as yet unidentified) has created a website using the Dunlop Conveyor Belting name and has even copied text extracts from Dunlop's own website to create the illusion that they are Dunlop's official Indian operation. This enables them to attract enquiries from would-be Dunlop customers who innocently believe that they are buying genuine Dunlop quality at lower prices. It is very difficult to deal with this kind of

fraudulent practice. Even if you manage to have one website closed down; they will quickly create another.

Expensive consequences

Not only are such practices illegal, they also have very serious consequences - not just for the big name manufacturers - but also for their customers and authorised distributors.

Dunlop's sales and marketing director, Andries Smilda has worked in the industry for more than 20 years and he believes that the problem has a very widespread impact.

"Dunlop has established a worldwide reputation over many generations for producing conveyor belts of the highest quality and naturally that is of enormous importance to us," says Smilda. "If our customers buy belts of inferior quality in the mistaken belief that they are using Dunlop then that will not only result in lost sales but also damage our good name. Using inferior quality belts also puts our customer's operational efficiency at risk."

It has been standard practice for Dunlop to carry out laboratory tests to measure performance qualities and conformity to recognised international industry standards.

These tests are not only performed on their own belts, but also those of competitors.

"We have to know precisely what we are competing against so that we can maintain quality and continue to develop even better products," explains Smilda.

"Conveyors in the recycling industry carry tonnes of material. If these belts fail or if they are not sufficiently resistant to fire for example then the results can potentially be very dangerous."

One of the problems seems to lie with the fact that, at first glance, industrial conveyor belts all look very similar, i.e. big long lengths of thick black rubber.

According to Smilda, to the untrained eye it is almost impossible to tell just by looking at the belt.

"The recycling plant that thinks they have saved money by buying a belt at a low price invariably pays a much higher cost in the longer term because the belts stretch and wear out much faster than they should do.

"Apart from the disruption to output they will fit two or three belts when one good quality belt should have sufficed."

In our experience, paying 30% more for a genuinely good quality belt usually results in up to 100% (or more) longer operational life.

More legislation?

Does the answer lie with extra legislation of some kind? The Dunlop management certainly do not think so. They argue that the law in most countries, especially within Europe, provides sufficient recourse if malpractice can be proved. Somewhat surprisingly, they lay much of the responsibility on the doorstep of manufacturers; including themselves.

R&D director, Dr Michiel Eijpe says that permanent branding during the production process has not always been consistent: "I think that perhaps we (Dunlop) have been a little complacent in the past but times have obviously changed. During the past few

months we have introduced new branding methods using coloured rubber compound vulcanised into the belt that describes the belt type and also includes the wording 'Made in Holland'. We also place much more emphasis on the use of branded packaging, again making the fact that the belts have been made in Holland very visible."

Buyer beware

Our advice to all who buy conveyor belts, regardless of supplier, is never assume that the belt being delivered is precisely what was ordered. We recommend that, unless the belt has been delivered directly from the manufacturer, a few basic checks should

be carried out before fitting. If the original manufacturers packaging has been used then that is a good sign, but unless it is a full sized roll then there may not be any packaging.

The most important check is to inspect the top and bottom surfaces of the belt to see if the manufacturers branding can be seen.

The most important message is that if the buyer is at all suspicious then they should contact the original manufacturer. They will usually know if they have supplied a particular specification of belt to a trader or distributor. In our case, we can also either test a sample for authenticity and compliance or, wherever practical, send an expert to the site.

In other words: 'Buyer beware'.

RWW



Dunlop Conveyor Belting's advice to clients is to check the manufacturer's branding on the belts themselves