

How Netherlands-based Fenner Dunlop Conveyor Belting are using their long-established culture of innovation and product quality to overcome the challenges posed by imports from South and East Asia

By Jan Willems



EUROPEAN MANUFACTURERS - THE PRIME TARGET

The market for industrial conveyor belts has always been competitive but recent years have seen mind-boggling price differences between belts that are claimed to be of an identical specification. This battle for market share is dominated by manufacturers in South and East Asia, primarily China. As with so many other industries before them, such as steel to name but one, their strategy is to saturate the market and squeeze competitors out of business by selling at prices which, especially for European-based belt manufacturers, are simply unachievable.



Most European belt manufacturers have been squeezed out of business by low-priced Asian imports.

Consequently, many European conveyor belt manufacturers who have tried to fight a price war have disappeared, leaving less than a handful of big brand players such as Fenner Dunlop, who are owned by Michelin Group, still operating in full.

BUCKING THE TREND

So, why are Fenner Dunlop continuing to thrive in the face of such competition? The answer, it appears, is a very long history (more than 100 years) of a true commitment to the quality and longevity of their products and the constant search for further improvement. Sales & Marketing Director, Andries Smilda, has been with the company for more than 40 years. "This company had a quality culture long before I was born. From the beginning, the

management clearly had a policy of winning and retaining business by providing top quality products that, because they lasted so long, were also very good value for money. They were also great innovators and improvers. I'm proud to say that that is the primary reason why we continue to win market share despite the crazy prices of the manufacturers in Asia and elsewhere. There is always a market for quality."

THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING

It is fair to say that Fenner Dunlop reputation within the world of conveyor belt users is one of grudging respect and an acceptance that their belts are seen as the benchmark for all others. Indeed, field surveys and laboratory testing consistently confirm that their belts continue to run successfully for between 300 to 500% longer than the majority of their competitors, especially non-European versions. Understandably, Fenner Dunlop argue that such differences in operational lifetime and a far fewer stoppages for repairs more than compensates for competitor prices that can be as much as 50% lower.

The fact that they also regularly encounter blatant cases of counterfeiting, forgery and misrepresentation is perhaps the ultimate testimony to their reputation for excellence. Some unscrupulous organisations claim to own Fenner Dunlop while some claim to manufacture on behalf of the company or that they are approved re-sellers of Fenner Dunlop 'Made in The Netherlands' conveyor belts.

To be fair, Fenner Dunlop are also regarded as being 'expensive', especially when compared to the prices on offer for imported belts. However, when talking to Fenner Dunlop employees, throughout the company, they all say the same things – "The difference in price reflects the

difference in quality" and "Price is what you pay but the cost is what you spend", which demonstrates a clear belief in the company's 'lowest lifetime cost' ethos.

HOW COST-CUTTING IMPACTS ON MEDIUM TO LONG-TERM VALUE

Conveyor belts have to meet many challenging demands so they must all be produced using a very precise recipe of ingredients and production disciplines, all of which influence performance, durability and longevity. The most basic demands are resistance to abrasive wear and the degrading effects on the rubber caused by ground level ozone (O₃) and ultraviolet light.



Having no resistance to ozone and UV exposure significantly reduces operational lifetime.

Because raw materials alone can represent more than 60% of the cost of producing a conveyor belt, several cost (price) cutting practices are employed by those who use low price as their prime weapon. This includes the routine use of unregulated, low-grade raw materials, the use of bulking agents and large proportions of recycled scrap rubber of highly questionable origin. Even more damaging is the substitution of essential polymers such as carbon black with low-grade versions and often the total omission) of key ingredients such as antioxidants essential to resisting premature rubber degradation.

These methods, plus others related to the fabrics used in the carcass for example, allow unscrupulous manufacturers to massively undercut the prices of those at the quality end of the market. At the same time, it explains why such stark differences in price and quality exist.

STAYING AHEAD USING INNOVATION.

As legendary actress Lauren Bacall famously once said, "Standing still is the fastest way of moving backwards in a rapidly changing world". The evidence that



False economy: low-price, poor quality conveyor belts are destined for an early grave.

A huge advantage - Fenner Dunlop develop and produce their unique fabrics in their own weaving facilities in North America.



Fenner Dunlop agree with that sentiment is indisputable thanks to a long track record of innovation. The basic construction of rubber conveyor belts has not fundamentally changed since 1905 when multi-layered conveyor belts made from cotton and rubber were first introduced. Since those early days, both the rubber and the cotton have been replaced by much stronger synthetic versions. During that time, Dunlop have been at the forefront of rubber technology, developing compounds that defied all previous expectations in every respect. However, the multi-layered structure remained unchanged along with the principle that the heavier the application, the more layers that are needed.

Until, that is, Fenner Dunlop engineers introduced a radical change of thinking

based on the fact that the greatest influence on the strength and other essential physical properties of a conveyor belt is the design and quality of the ply material used to create the carcass. Since the hugely successful introduction of their single and dual-ply UsFlex belt more than



X Series belts are able to replace standard multi-ply specification belts as high as 1250/4.

two decades ago, they continued to develop the concept by taking advantage of having their own fabric weaving facility in the USA where they have developed a range of unique super-strength fabrics for single-ply belts (Ultra X and Nova X) and the longer established single and dual-ply UsFlex constructions using the umbrella brand name, the X Series.

WHY ARE SINGLE AND DUAL PLY BELTS THE FUTURE?

The two prime reasons why Fenner Dunlop, both in Europe and North America, invested in the development of single and dual ply belts are that Ultra X, Nova X and UsFlex are far tougher and more resilient than conventional multi-ply belting.

The belts possess a longitudinal rip resistance that is more than five times greater than multi-ply belts of equivalent rating and up to three times greater impact resistance compared to conventional belting. "Since we introduced Ultra X, more than 200,000m of belts have been sold to a wide range of customers and industries and, without exception, with totally positive experiences," explains Mr Smilda proudly.

Although they still manufacture a big range of conventional multi-ply and steel cord belting, Fenner Dunlop's management certainly regard their X Series single-ply and dual-ply belts as the future of industrial conveying belting. Given the evidence, the future seems to have already arrived!