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Mobility of the future

There has been a push towards greater fuel efficiency and lower costs in the transportation industry, as players fight to remain profitable and competitive and need to comply in time with regulatory requirements being set as part of countries' commitments to reduce global warming. Nonwovens are increasingly being used in vehicles due to the fact that they are a lighter weight, more fuel efficient and environmentally-friendly option than other materials. Self-driving vehicles are also poised to revolutionise the industry, particularly in the field of automotive interiors. As drivers become passengers and are free to experience the interior of their own cars, this presents a range of opportunities for employing adaptable nonwoven materials for increased comfort.

Visitors and exhibitors will gather at INDEX™17, the world's leading nonwovens exhibition, in Geneva from 4th-7th April 2017, to gain first-hand knowledge of the latest developments in nonwovens for transportation applications, with exhibitors showcasing the astonishing functional qualities of these versatile materials.

Light-weighting

According to EDANA, the international association serving the nonwovens and related industries and sponsor of the INDEX™17 show, annual growth in the tonnage of nonwoven fabrics used in the European automotive industry has averaged 11.3% between 2010 and 2015, and about 143,000 tonnes of nonwovens were used by the automotive sector in 2015. This is despite the fact that the production of cars and light vehicles in Europe grew by just 1.3% per year over the same period, showing just how much nonwovens are being incorporated into lightweight car designs, and suggests that a large deal of material substitution has already taken place.

The fast-moving automotive supply chain is continuously looking for cost savings due to price pressure from OEM manufacturers to reduce the overall cost of vehicles. As a result, nonwovens are increasingly becoming the material of choice amongst car manufacturers and suppliers, because they optimise fuel efficiency while reducing raw material costs. EDANA estimates that the use of nonwovens will save the average car 55 kg CO_2 equivalents over its lifetime.

"The automotive industry as our main customer base is always looking for cost savings, therefore nonwovens remain the material of choice," commented Harald Stini, Managing Director at Tenowo Nonwovens, the highly-engineered nonwovens company and leading automotive supplier based in Hof, Germany, "There is still a growing number of different applications for nonwovens in cars, with nonwovens specifically being designed for end-use requirements."

There has been a much stronger interest in lightweight and lower cost nonwovens, especially in combination with polyurethane foams. According to EDANA, nonwovens are 15-30% lighter than the traditional materials they replace and make the average car more than two kg lighter.

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Autonomous cars

There has been rapid progress in the development of autonomous vehicles, with surprising new announcements made almost weekly, and investment and innovations by leading companies, such as Apple, Google and Tesla Motors. Vehicles will soon become digitalized through computer-driven assistance controlled by software and chips, leaving passengers free to experience the interior of their vehicle. Automotive interiors are set to become the extension of the living room, with nonwovens employed for enhanced comfort and interiors customised to passenger needs.

Previously being used for internal layers, including seating, sound insulation and liners for car roofs and wheel arches, nonwovens will increasingly be employed in visible car parts. Integrated LED lighting, heating fabrics and position-sensing materials are among the products being introduced as a vehicle's interior assumes an ever-greater importance – and all at a modest cost.

Yanfeng Automotive Interiors, the world's largest supplier of automotive interior components, based in China, will speak at the dedicated seminar during the INDEX™17 show, to discuss its vision for the future of the automotive interiors industry.

The special properties of nonwovens allow for entirely new approaches in automotive design, and can be used to attain enormous improvements in a variety of lightweight applications.

Click here to book your own stand space at INDEX™17, and visitor registration will be available online here from early in 2017. For hotel bookings and additional information, please visit our website www.index17.org.

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