

The Razor Thin Line Between Success and Failure

Around 2010, the automotive industry began tightening its restrictions regarding the use of flame retardant (FR) fiber in vehicles. The change forced the industry's suppliers to re-evaluate the fiber in their components. Such was the case for a large Tier 1 supplier in the Southeast.

Prior to the FR changes, the customer had been using another supplier for their fiber who was unable to meet the new specs. "The fiber they were using could not pass their internal burn test," explains Henry Bridges, a member of the Leigh Fiber Sales and Marketing team. The customer decided to meet with Leigh fibers.

As a leading supplier to the auto industry, the customer has exacting standards regarding the performance, quality and price of its fiber. In addition to the tighter FR specs the fiber had to have the right hand and loft. The customer also needed a guaranteed supply and a per pound price that met their budget. These requirements narrowed the list of qualified suppliers substantially. Leigh Fibers made the short list.

The initial meeting was at Leigh Fibers' Wellford, SC headquarters. At the time, Bridges was head of the Scheduling and Production team and sat in on the meeting. "The P&S department is typically involved from the beginning so that we understand exactly what the customer's needs and challenges are," he explained. "My job at that meeting was primarily to listen and take good notes," he added.

As the customer detailed his challenge, however, Henry decided to offer a suggestion. "What if we were to add some wool?" he asked. It was an unusual suggestion. The industry had gravitated to using para- or meta-aramids for FR products. "Nobody was thinking about wool," he remembers. "But it's naturally fire-retardant, relatively easy to open and mix, and has an attractive price point," he explained.

The customer could have easily dismissed the suggestion as too unconventional or because it came from someone in charge of production and scheduling. Instead, he asked the team to explore the idea further.

Over the next couple of weeks, the Leigh Fibers team developed a variety of blends with different wool content. They soon hit on the perfect combination of FR performance, quality and price; assuring a reliable supply was never an issue.

Fast forward to 2015. Today, Leigh Fibers is the customer's sole supplier of fiber, feeding four key production lines. Everything Leigh produces for them contains wool as a key FR ingredient. Moreover, most of the major suppliers to the automotive industry have followed suit, using wool to meet their FR specs.

The line separating success from failure is razor thin; more times than not, it hinges on a single suggestion or decision. At Leigh Fibers, we have been fortunate to work with clients who seem to have a knack for consistently recognizing a potential opportunity and making the right decision. We are proud to have played a small part in their success.