

Dunlop launch new service in Italy

Having opened a sales office in Italy in September of last year, Dunlop Conveyor Belting have now launched their own Italian-based service company following the acquisition of Belt Service, who are located in Calcio near Bergamo. This means that Dunlop will now be able to provide a 'full service package' to customers in Italy in addition to their range of high quality conveyor belts.

Belt Service, which will be re-named 'Dunlop Service', has been well established in the Italian conveyor belt industry for over 30 years. Apart from providing fitting (splicing) services, Belt Service also have a thriving business in the supply of a wide range of conveyor components such as idlers, pulleys, motors etc, in fact almost everything to do with conveyor maintenance and repair. They also supply PVC belting and specialise in the application of profiles, sidewalls and cleats.

Dunlop Conveyor Belting has been actively supplying rubber multi-ply industrial conveyor belting to end users and OEM's (original equipment manufacturers) in Italy for many years. Until now, supply has largely been provided via distributors supported by sales and technical personnel based in Dunlop's head office and manufacturing plant in the Netherlands.

A match made in heaven?

Dunlop's country manager for Italy, Gianni Gresia, believes that combining the strengths of the two companies is a match made in heaven. *"Dunlop has a fantastic range and enormous stocks of quality products plus an outstanding level of technical expertise but most end-users of conveyor belts need a complete package where the belt is not only supplied but also fitted and serviced"*. says Mr Gresia. *"The creation of Dunlop Service means that we can now supply and fit our belts plus a lot more besides; in fact almost anything that users of conveyor belts might need"*.

According to Dunlop's Managing Director, Edwin Have, one of the key factors behind this investment was to enable users of conveyor belts to buy directly from a top quality manufacturer who can also provide the service they require. *"We operate at the quality end of the market providing products and technical support of the highest quality so we never claim to have the cheapest prices"* explained Mr Have. *"Distributors usually sell belts of varying qualities made by a number of different manufacturers. By buying direct from us the customer can be sure that he will get the best product available in the market place"*.

Faster service

Dunlop's Supply Chain Manager, Margot Dinges, is convinced that there are also significant logistical benefits because Dunlop will be holding a range of belts in stock on site in Calcio. *"Logistically, Holland is effectively the 'hub' of Europe so having our main stocks located there is ideal"* she explained. *"However, it is much better for our customers in Italy if we can also stock the belt types that they most regularly use so that we can respond faster and more efficiently when they have an urgent need. If necessary, we can supply within 48 hours directly from the Netherlands to our warehouse in Calcio or direct to any customer in the northern part of Italy"*.

Dunlop Service will initially employ some 12 personnel including 8 belt-splicing specialists, providing sales and technical support to customers throughout Italy although realistically, the provision of splicing services will mainly be concentrated in the north within a 250 km radius of their premises in Calcio. *"We are already looking for potential service partners to enable us to provide a more localised fitting service to our customers in central and southern Italy"* explains Mr Gresia, who is clearly very enthusiastic about the challenges that lie ahead. *"Although we already have an excellent business base there is tremendous potential for growth now that we have not only the best products but also the best service. My challenge is to make sure that the whole of the Italian market benefits from these advantages. We are going to be very busy over the coming months trying to get that message across!"*

Not the genuine article?

At the same time as they are making a major commitment to their future within Italy, Dunlop also face an unexpected challenge in the form of counterfeiting and 'misrepresentation' within the conveyor belt industry that has potentially serious consequences for users of conveyor belts not only in Italy but throughout Europe.

"Conveyor belt manufacturing has always been a highly competitive industry and that can only be a good thing for the end users" explains Dunlop's general sales manager Les Williams. "But what isn't a good thing is that we are seeing a growing problem where low quality belts, often of very dubious origin, are being bought by some unscrupulous traders and distributors and then sold to end users as being manufactured by one of the relatively small number of 'big name' brands. I cannot speak for other manufacturers but we (Dunlop) are certainly affected by this practice".

Unwitting victims

Although the major manufacturers seem to be the unwitting victims of this kind of deception, no evidence has yet been found which points to a manufacturer falsely branding its products. However, what is certainly evident is that large scale 'dumping' of belting, primarily from Asia is now taking place on an unprecedented scale and which is regularly being 'passed off' as having been supplied by one of the major manufacturers. With the trading and fitting of conveyor belts to end users worth many millions each year, it is therefore hardly surprising to find some who are willing to deceive in order to earn bigger profit margins.

End users purchase a large proportion of belts from traders as well as from vulcanising companies and distributors rather than buying direct from the manufacturer. This is usually due to the fact that most distributors will only provide a fitting service if they supply the actual belt itself. This is a long-standing practice and according to Dunlop, the majority of traders and distributors operate perfectly honestly. However, Dunlop maintain that they are finding more and more cases where their customers have been told that they have been supplied with genuine Dunlop belts but which in reality have actually been manufactured elsewhere and are invariably of inferior quality or below the required specification.

Potential danger

Not only is this misrepresentation obviously illegal, it also has very serious consequences both for the big name manufacturers and for their customers and authorised distributors. 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,"* said Mr 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 and the good name of our authorised distributors, agents and service partners".* Mr Smilda maintains that using inferior quality belts also puts their customer's operational efficiency at risk.

It has long been standard practice for Dunlop to carry out exhaustive laboratory tests to measure performance qualities and conformity to recognised international industry standards. But these tests are not only performed on their own belts but also those of their competitors. *"We have to know precisely what we are competing against so that we can maintain quality and continue to develop better products. We must also be able to prove the superiority of our products,"* explained Mr Smilda. *"You would be amazed at the differences between our belts and those of other manufacturers. The difference in vital qualities such as resistance to abrasion or heat can easily be in the region of 30% amongst European manufactured belts and when we test belts made in places such as South East Asia then the findings are usually even more dramatic. Industrial conveyors can carry tonnes of material at quite fast speeds. If these belts fail or if they are not sufficiently resistant to fire or heat for example then the results can potentially be very dangerous".*

Dunlop have numerous examples including one where a unique specification of belt (Dunlop UsFlex) has rip and tear resistance that is more than three times greater compared to what they refer to as “a cheap imitation”. Another recent example concerned a belt that was claimed to be oil resistant and fire retardant but when tested it was found to have little or no resistance to oil and, according to Mr Smilda, “burned like paper!”

One of the problems seems to lie with the fact that, at first glance, industrial conveyor belts all look very similar – big long lengths of thick black rubber! To the untrained eye it is almost impossible to tell just by looking at the belt. *“The end user who thinks he has bought a quality belt at a cheap price can often face paying a heavy cost in the longer term because the belts do not last so long and can cause lost production and higher maintenance costs”.*

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 the major manufacturers including themselves. Manufacturing 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 bit naïve and complacent in the past but times have obviously changed and we are now making even greater efforts to consistently brand either the top or bottom cover surface of the belt at 10 meter intervals. We also place much more emphasis on the use of branded packaging”.*

Buyer beware!

Dunlop’s advice to all who buy conveyor belts is to *never* assume that the belt being delivered is precisely what was ordered. They urge caution and recommend that unless the belt has been delivered directly from the manufacturer then a few simple 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 branded packaging”* explained Les Williams. *“The most important check is to inspect the top and bottom surfaces of the belt to see if the manufacturers brand can be seen”.*

According to Dunlop, the most important message is that if the buyer is at all suspicious then they should personally 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!”*

Lower lifetime cost

Gianni Gresia is determined that the market approach of Dunlop Service will be very different from their competitors and that his customers will also see real cost benefits, which he is clearly passionate about. *“If you think about it, service companies make money from fitting belts so if they supply high quality belts that, say, last two or three times longer than the average then it is not particularly good business for them. It’s better for them to supply and fit a belt two or three times a year rather than once a year. Our policy is exactly the opposite. We aim to supply and fit belts that give the longest possible operational life and therefore a much lower cost over the lifetime of the belt. We know from experience that when customers realise this fact then they are much more likely to come back to us when they next need a conveyor belt. For us, that makes good business sense”.*

In these uncertain economic times, it is certainly a welcome sight to see a company such as Dunlop make such a positive investment in their market. Let’s hope that many more will follow this example.