

Mission green carpets

Keya Acharya

How difficult do you think it would be to sound lively, bright and enthusiastic about selling carpet tiles ?

"Pretty difficult in the beginning," says Raj Menon, Country Manager, India, of multinational company InterfaceFlor, explaining the Indian social mindset that comes into play when asked: "What do you do?"

And if the answer is, "Oh, I sell carpets", the reaction is mixed with connotations of cart-driving carpet-sellers, in an economically-aspiring middle class that doesn't consider it as being socially smart enough.

"But tell a group of young MBA graduates, 'how would you like to be part of a zero-emission company' and they are immediately interested," says Ramon Arratia, Sustainability Director of the \$1 billion turnover global company, in India since 2004.



Equally interesting is that Ramon's speech on the company's innovations on environmental conservation in its production processes had him 'gheraoed' by a gaggle of journalists wanting to know more about the company. The gathering of over 100 journalists from 50 countries, was hosted at Cuneo, near Milan, by prominent Italian media organisation Greenaccord.

The company makes something as 'everyday' as carpets, designed in tile-shaped squares for office flooring. The difference is in its remarkably judicious use and re-use of resources in making these smart-looking carpet tiles with a base made of a polyvinyl composite called 'glasspac'.

Since its raw material of nylon twine for the carpeting and PVC and fly-ash carbon for the base uses petroleum derivative material, the product is immediately an environmental issue. But since 1996, the company has saved \$433 million in avoiding costs of wastage.

It has achieved an 80% reduction in waste sent to landfills and an equal percentage in reduction of water-usage for manufacturing, 43% reduction in total energy usage of which non-renewable energy usage is down by 60% per unit of production. The carpet tile base now uses 9% of PVC with the rest made of post-industrial and post-consumer recycled material.

Mission Zero

"Our promise is to be 'Mission Zero', to eliminate any negative impact our company may have on the environment by the year 2020", says Arratia. The main issue in becoming conservation-oriented in an already-established industrial process, is in coming up with innovations within that process itself.

For instance, says Arratia, the company came up with an ultrasonic cutting-machine for its tiles which saved 310 tonnes of waste (from its annual production), and reduced waste itself by 80%.

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Whatever carpet waste remains is recycled into producing new backing for the tiles. The system, called 'Re-Entry', which the company has trademarked, uses its 600,000 tonnes of its annual carpet waste to make 200,000 sq.metres of new carpet. It also 'takes back' its old carpets from customers for recycling.

"But in India I am now facing high costs of transporting old carpets back to Europe for recycling," says Menon.

"Besides, it makes very good sense to start a recycling system in India which will generate jobs, economic returns and livelihoods for an entire group of people," says Menon.

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