

With designing becoming a major part of the product development process, materials companies are hoping to change the way in which the strait-laced plastics industry has been specifying materials. Eastman Chemicals is one such company. It has introduced a novel material sample initiative, with an added value.

# Scent of a pebble

In the past, *Eastman Chemicals* has used samples like tensile strips or drinks coasters to show customers the versatility of its resins. It has also used colour plaques that were displayed in folders or strung together on small chains, which is quite a common practice in the industry. But last October it decided that it had to make a difference in the industry.

The US company went on to launch a new approach as to how its materials were to be presented and called it Material Difference. Samples were produced from its Tenite cellulose resin to invoke the sensory feelings of not only touch and sight but also smell and sound. To do this, the Tenite material was moulded into pebble-like shapes and a refreshing palette of colours and heavenly smelling scents were added on!

Even though *Eastman* has gone full-scale into marketing Tenite, there is nothing new about the wood pulp-based material itself. Tenite has been used to produce tool handles and toothbrushes since the 1930s. What is new, however, is the way the design perspective has been brought to the material. This design initiative follows an earlier project the company embarked on two years ago. At that time, it worked with design innovation company *IDEO* to produce six eyewear prototypes from Tenite, simply with an eye to revitalising the use of the material in the industry.

The first phase of Eastman's Material Difference programme encompasses pebble-shaped samples to showcase its Tenite cellulose resin



## Inspiration leads

So what does the chemical company hope to achieve from its latest exercise? While it has not detracted from its original path, which is to revitalise interest in Tenite, *Eastman* has other plans. Said Gaylon White, *Eastman's* Manager of Design Industry Program, "Historically, the target audience for our material samples has been moulders, extruders and other plastic manufacturers who have wanted samples that emphasise the technical attributes of a material. The pebbles, on the other hand, are meant to inspire designers to re-discover Tenite. With this, we hope that they will use Tenite in ways we have never imagined before."

Moreover, since packaging companies are moving away from the traditional approach to product design, *Eastman* is hoping to cash in on this by being a key player in the innovation process. "To capitalise on this, materials suppliers must be able to close the knowledge gap between the material and the designer. *Eastman* is working to narrow this gap that traditionally has separated designers from engineers and chemists," explained White.

One of the ways in which *Eastman* intends to close the gap is through its new Innovation Lab website it launched last year. Having been in service for a year now, the website has had nearly 124,000 hits. "The user base is growing at a monthly rate of more than 30% and of the nearly 900 registered users, approximately 60% are designers and design engineers," claimed White, while adding that the attributes of *Eastman's* materials are described in a simple, non-technical language. The website also features 28 applications and has interesting visuals of products and packaging. Designed by a UK-based design consultancy, *The Brewery*, the website captured a gold award in the 2005 Industrial Design Excellence Award (IDEA) competition in the Digital Media and Interfaces category. The IDEA competition is co-sponsored by BusinessWeek and the *Industrial Designers Society of America*.



Available in scented and unscented versions, the scented samples were created for designers to incorporate the sense of smell into their designs



Each pebble is made of two fitted halves, allowing designers to mix and match the colours and fragrances

### ➤ Precious pebbles

According to White, for *Eastman* to inspire designers and brand owners to use its materials, it needed samples that were able to “speak to the heart, not just the head”. The company set about its tantalising prospect by holding workshops for designers. “We wanted to look at materials from the perspective of a designer and to explore further with designers on what they would like to see. In particular, we asked what *Eastman* should be doing to open up this opportunity,” he added.

The next step was to select an appropriate material. “In Tenite cellulotics, we discovered a gold mine of sensory attributes. The gloss and clarity that Tenite gives to a finished product make it visually attractive and luxurious. As the name cellulotics suggests, the material comes from trees. It has the warmth of wood and sounds solid. And its natural properties allow oxygen to interact with scent molecules and emit an aroma over extended periods of time,” explained White, about the choice of material. *Eastman* teamed up with *Rotuba*, a custom compounder and extruder and *Givaudan*, the international fragrance house to develop its project. And so the cellulotics samples were born. “We call them Precious Pebbles because they engender the same feelings as the pebbles you find so irresistible on a beach,” said White.



A variety of colours have been created for the pebbles. This one pays tribute to the national colours from the Brazilian flag



The pebble is used to display the transparency and clarity of the material

aromatherapy set of pebbles with scents created by *Givaudan*. “Just by holding the pebbles in your hands you will feel relaxed and your hands will also smell better,” said White. Could this be a hint that the pebbles have other uses?

### Why the scents?

Since the scents were not added to throw designers off the track, they are certainly going to earn their keep in the designing aspect. Notwithstanding the fact that *Eastman* is still gathering technical data about how long the aroma will last in the cellulotics, there is a huge market for scented products. “In 2003, Americans spent US\$1.7 billion on scented products for the home. US demand for flavours and fragrances is forecast to grow more than 5% annually, approaching US\$6 billion in 2007,” explained White, adding that consumer preferences for natural ingredients will drive the trend for more complex and authentic flavours and fragrances.

## Materials



Since Tenite has been around since the 1930s and has been used in a variety of applications, the pebbles were created to enhance the versatility of the material

Designers, who were invited to *Eastman's* brainstorming sessions, suggested several ideas on how scented cellulosics could be used, especially in personal care products, fashion accessories and collectables. "Judging from the interest sparked by the pebbles since we introduced them last

October, the timing is right for scented cellulosics. Major companies in markets as diverse as cosmetics, furniture, automotive, sporting goods, greeting cards and computer accessories are exploring the material as a way to differentiate their brands and connect emotionally with consumers," stated White.

### Power of the pebble

Ultimately, how much of an influence the pebbles will have on the industry is best expressed by designers themselves. According to Victor Ermoli, Chairman of the Product Design Department at Savannah College of Art and Design, "The pebbles show the benefits of the material in a way that designers clearly understand. The thickness of the samples and how the designs use light to enhance the properties of the material is excellent." If all designers were to have similar opinions as Ermoli, *Eastman* would have won half the battle.

But this is just the beginning. The scheme of things for Material Difference includes a full range of samples to showcase the company's portfolio. "By introducing innovative samples, our goal is to convey the breadth and range of our materials and to communicate our brand values," said White. All this is in line with the Fortune 500 company's strategy to expand its business (it had sales of US\$6.6 billion last year). "We are shaping and redefining *Eastman's* capabilities by reaching out to new markets and customers," added White. Whether it is just a clever marketing tool or a "powerful demonstration of how design and materials can come together to evoke emotion", the pebble is here to stay. And who knows, it might even help in shaping future trends in the materials industry. ◆



A box containing a multi-coloured set of pebbles that were developed in collaboration with Rotuba Extruders and Givaudan

**Screw Chiller**  
Shanghai Office:  
Sungang District, Shanghai, China.  
Tel: +86-21-47765-3308  
Fax: +86-21-47765-3310

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Shenzhen Factory:  
Daxinying Industrial Zone,  
Haigang Longhua Village,  
Song Gang Town, Shenzhen City,  
Guangdong Province, China.  
Tel: +86-755-2763-0001  
Fax: +86-755-2763-3303

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