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Panelists: Innovation needs collaboration

Challenge designers, engineers to work together, say experts

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TAMPA, FLA. — In the world of plastics design, water can start with a Y and a pig can be called a pug.

These extreme revelations were no surprise to the panelists who gathered to discuss design and innovation at the *Plastics News* Executive Forum, March 10-12 in Tampa.

Y Water, a mineral-infused drink aimed at kids, will debut April 1 at several Whole Foods Market stores in Southern California. The beverage comes in a Y-shaped bottle made of Eastman Chemical Co.'s Eastar-brand copolyester resin. The packaging then can be used as an interlocking building toy once it is empty.

The Y bottle was designed by Yves Béhar, founder of San Francisco design firm fuse-project — from an idea by German marketing executive and inventor Thomas Arndt — with help from machinery maker Bekum America Corp. of Williamston, Mich.

"Thomas Arndt was told the Y-shaped bottle couldn't be done, but we had used Eastar before and thought we could do it," Bekum national sales director Gary Carr told forum attendees. "We didn't have much to lose and were fairly confident it would be successful. We had faith in our development lab and from there it took off."

Previously, Bekum had helped design stylish, contoured bottles made of Eastar for POM Wonderful LLC's pomegranate juice.

"However you hold it, [the Y bottle] is Y-shaped and fun," said Gaylon White, design industry program director with Kingsport, Tenn.-based Eastman. "We had worked with Bekum on the POM bottle and wanted to show that the Y bottle could be done."

Martin Bunce, founding partner of design

firm Tin Horse Design Ltd. of Marlborough, England, expressed a bit of designer envy when he first saw the product.

"When I saw the Y bottle, I wished I had done that and wondered why it wasn't done for Coca-Cola," said Bunce. "But if you put that bottle in front of the Coke system, it would die from a heart attack."

He suggested that traditional storage, shipping and dispensing systems would not be prepared to handle the odd-shaped container. But he acknowledged that, at least for now, it's a niche product that needn't fit into mass-handling systems.

The Pug is a pig-shaped prototype bottle developed last year by Bunce and Tin Horse, which focuses on structural packaging applications. Bunce said the design, not yet commercialized, solved a couple of challenges.

"We wanted to figure out how we could get a play bottle and some character into a product made on a filling line," he recalled. The Pug also doubles as a stackable toy when emptied.

The Y bottle and Pug are recent examples of design and manufacturing working together to solve a problem. But the road to that solution isn't always a smooth one.

"There's sometimes conflict between the design and engineering processes," said Frank Tyneski, executive director

of the Industrial Designers Society of America, a 3,300-member trade group based in Dulles, Va.

"Designers have to learn the language of business — and manufacturers won't learn about design by shaking hands with their design team once a year at the company picnic."

The disconnect between design and manufacturing can be seen in a lack of products that can be recycled easily, said Robert Malloy, chair of the plastics engineering department at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell.

"Recycling needs to be involved," Malloy

said. "It happens some in packaging, but that's about the only one. Companies like Kodak used to be able to put all their marketing and design and manufacturing people in the same room to meet a goal, but [because of outsourcing] now that rarely happens."

Malloy singled out Welch's, the juice and fruit product maker in Concord, Mass., as a company that has improved its recyclability via design. Welch's changed the packaging of its frozen juice concentrates from a cardboard roll with metal end caps to a blow molded, high density polyethylene container with a low density PE top. The new package aids in post-consumer recycling.

Tyneski, who previously worked as a designer for BlackBerry maker Research in Motion Ltd. and toy maker Fisher-Price, recalled how a recent purchase of an expensive pair of audio headphones provided proof of excessive packaging.

"The headphones came packaged in a box with a plastic clamshell and other parts inside," he said. "Manufacturers still have the idea that if something costs that much, it has to be in a large package. The whole thing could have fit into a small envelope."

Bunce singled out a pair of products that have taken design in a new direction in recent years. ICI Paints redesigned its traditional tin paint can into a contoured plastic container that's easier to hold, and Procter & Gamble Co. used various-sized plastic containers to commercialize its Febreze line of air fresheners.

"It isn't always about having enough imagination," Bunce said. "The challenge is finding the system to properly embrace it."



Bunce

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