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## Touchy-Feely

A marketing scheme highlights the sensual qualities of materials.

.....BY DAVID SOKOL

From a distance, a sample of Eastman Chemical Company's Tenite cellulosic could be mistaken for a computer mouse or a bar of soap. Closer inspection reveals, however, that the plastic neither clicks nor cleanses. In fact, it doesn't do anything but inspire.

These glossy pebbles are part of Eastman's Material Difference program, which teaches designers to fall in love with a material because of its sensual qualities. The goal is to drive creative inspiration and, ultimately, sales (should the smitten designer ever decide to make copious use of the stuff).

Traditionally, a raw-materials company like Eastman would sell plastic pellets to manufacturers and engineers by the trainload. But with certain market categories shriveling up—think of film stock, rendered obsolete by digital photography—Eastman and competitors such as GE Plastics are repositioning themselves so designers will think about specifying their materials from the very beginning of a product's life cycle. Eastman first began tickling designers' interests when it commissioned IDEO to imagine new uses for a cellulosic and a copolyester, which resulted in six eyewear prototypes (see "Rainbow Coalition," I.D. June 2003).

The Material Difference box comes with three or five Tenite cellulosic pebbles, each split in half and indented to allow designers to test potentially corrosive fillings, such as perfume or liquor. The presentation begs for appreciation of the plastic's clarity (ideal for faux-crystal lamp bases), tactile warmth, color saturation, and aural qualities. (Cellulosics, which are made

of wood pulp, give off a hollow knocking sound when struck, rather than the *ping* of urethane.)

There are 16 variations of boxes, and six of them appeal to the nose as well, with odors such as piña colada, rose, and chocolate in a "Romance Collection."

In other words, Material Difference appeals to the sensualist in every designer. Before this, "our idea of samples was pellets, plaques, tensile bars, or a sheet with a nail and screw in it," says Gaylon White, Eastman's manager of design industry programs, flourishing a translucent lime-green copolyester plaque. "All those samples speak to the technical capabilities of the material, to the engineer's head. They absolutely don't communicate to the other senses."

Material Difference complements a broader marketing program that was launched last year with a website. The site explains the attributes of Eastman materials in unscientific terms and provides other resources that allow designers to appreciate a material's attributes, such as visualization software that renders images according to the product's optical properties.

White says that Eastman will give the Material Difference treatment to the company's copolyesters, fibers, and chemicals, too, but not to expect endless iterations of pebbles: "We want different shapes to connote different brands," he says. "It's going to be harder to communicate what they do, but we believe we need to present not just the material's attributes, but its emotional potential." Requests for information and samples can be made through the Innovation Lab website, [www.eastmaninnovationlab.com](http://www.eastmaninnovationlab.com).

