

Evolve or Die The most remarkable innovation at Interzum? The spirit of innovation.

By Kenn Busch

Interzum, of course, is the biennial global event where suppliers to the furniture industry show off their latest products and ideas. Usually, it's a veritable Epcot Center of design and materials, with competitors vying to outdo one another with outrageous opulence and hospitality.

Picture a full-service "biergarten" where attendees in the latest Italian business wear are served sausages, schnitzel and frothy German beer by attractive women in traditional bräuhaus costumes. Even exhibitors from Asia, the United States and elsewhere get into the when-in-Rome spirit. Fun is had, business is done, and the normal existential wear-and-tear of a four-day trade show is briefly forgotten.

This year, not so much. As with every major industry event, many familiar companies either scaled back or bailed out of Interzum. Some are truly in financial dire straits; others succumbed to that flawed but all too-common knee-jerk logic: "Sales are down! We'd better cut our marketing budget and delay that new product introduction!"

As conventional wisdom — not to mention the lessons of Marketing 101 — tell us, in lean times our marketing dollar goes farther. This is also the best time to rethink and reinvent your products, their uses and even your company itself. Or, as the pop-culture business gurus like to say, "Evolve or die."

Fortunately, there were several excellent examples of this brand of true grit on exhibit at Interzum 2009. One of the most notable was German company Resopal, the venerable HPL supplier that's often referred to as "Europe's Formica," which is a little ironic since Resopal is now owned by Wilsonart.

It must be said here that one of Resopal's greatest corporate assets is its managing director, Donald Schaefer. Having a chief executive that can give you the details of the company's latest products, applications and marketing vision is not, sadly, very common these days. An MD that is still at a trade fair on its last day, and a Saturday to boot (when most other exhibitors' top brass stayed only for the first two days, if they showed up at all), that's unusual. And an MD willing to have an impromptu hour-long sit-down with a foreign journalist? Well, that's all but unheard of.

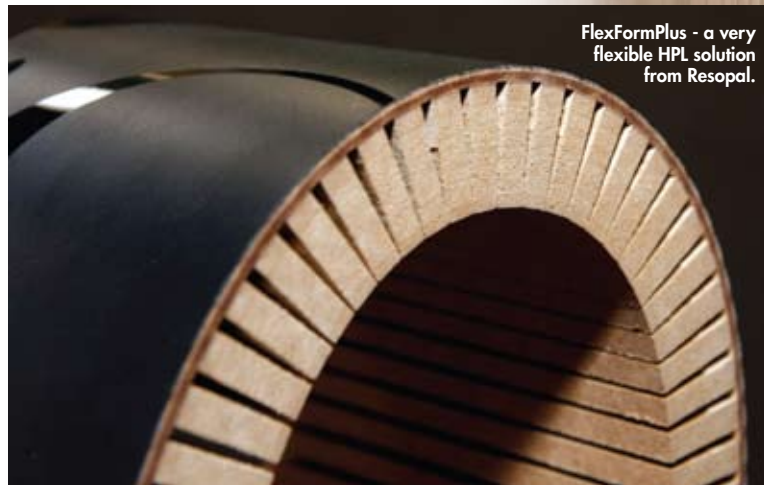
Resopal's mission, called "Resopal Rooming," is to elevate HPL from a basic furniture surface to an ideal material for most if not all interior applications.

"HPL can compete successfully with any other material out there," Schaefer told me, "and it can also connect other materials in a setting. It's not just 'laminated'; it's the ideal material for creating spaces.

"The only way for us to survive is to increase the applications for our products. As new materials like foils and TFM have entered the market, most suppliers put their energy into trying to grab bigger slices of a finite pie, beating each other up in the process. We should be focusing on finding new uses and creating a larger market for all materials. We need to innovate, think differently and forget everything we think we know about how our products should be used."

Part of this process is refining the way Resopal communicates with architects and designers, and helping its fabricator customers do the same.

"This is something our entire industry



FlexFormPlus - a very flexible HPL solution from Resopal.

should be part of because for designers, price is not the number one priority. If we can create pull-through demand for products made with laminates, fabricators have better opportunities for more profitable projects. In most cases, our materials are more affordable, more consistent and more durable than the other material systems they normally specify. We just have to do more to inspire them to use it in more applications."

To encourage use of laminates in new places and new ways, Resopal has made some significant investments, starting with a new waterproof substrate adapted from the auto industry. Symalite is glass-fiber reinforced polypropylene not unlike the soundproofing material you find on the undersides of cars. As it happens, Symalite is also waterproof. By sandwiching it between two layers of HPL, Resopal creates a 100 percent waterproof, very rigid product that's an ideal solution for flooring — and walls — in wet room applications. Resopal calls it SpaStyling, and has developed a single tongue-and-groove profile that makes it easy to install as a floor; it also mounts on walls without any visible fastening system.

Another plus is, it's quite a bit lighter than similar products with wood-based panel substrates. Schaefer says Volkswagen has already specified SpaStyling flooring for hundreds of its dealer showrooms. The product won a "Best of the Best" award at Interzum because it addresses a significant challenge for laminated components in wet areas — their susceptibility to moisture.

Tight radii and curves present another barrier for HPL use. Enter FlexformPlus - 0.8 mm Resopal laminate bonded to a fibrous leather substrate, which is in turn bonded to a slotted panel. The leather material compensates for stresses, prevents the slots from "telegraphing" through the laminate, and ensures stability and bending, even when extremely small radii are involved.

These two innovations are pretty impressive, but Resopal didn't stop there. They're making use of press plates with distinct designs using variations in the matte and gloss textures, which add another dimension to solid color and printed decors. They're



Resopal's SpaStyle product is 100 percent waterproof, thanks to its Symalite core.
(All photos by Kenn Busch)

also using glass (instead of steel) press plates to create some of their laminates, which Schaefer says impart finer textures for a new tactile experience.

And in collaboration with Nolte Holzwerkstoff GmbH & Co. KG in Gernersheim, Resopal supplies components for doors, exhibitions, store fixtures and interior design, furniture and kitchen worktops in a special lightweight version for all projects in which the focus is on cost savings, easy handling and environmental or health aspects. "Rheinspan AirMaxx" is characterized by up to 30 percent lower weight than normal particleboard, achieved by filling the board's core layer with tiny polystyrene balls in place of some of the wood chip. Processing and durability are identical with those of conventional chipboard.

So, what's the bottom line ... what has this kind of thinking meant for Resopal's business?

"The new products we've introduced in the last few years are now responsible for 26 percent of our annual turnover, but almost 40 percent of our margins," Schaefer told me. "Yes, we've made some mistakes along the way, but that's okay."

Putting it all together, Resopal is an enviable example of a company that is broadening its markets, taking the risks necessary to develop new products and applications, and refusing to succumb to the impulse to slash its marketing — a move that can permanently hobble a brand's image in trying times like these. **W**

Ed. note: Kenn Busch is a journalist and architectural photographer. He has been covering furniture and interior design since 1990, as an editor with Wood Digest, Laminating Design & Technology, and Surface & Panel magazines. His website, www.materialintelligence.com, is a resource on decorative surfaces and their applications for architects, interior designers and fabricators.

• NEW AND NOTABLE AT INTERZUM •

As is always the case, in a tough economy the most agile and innovative companies find the resources to refine their offerings, expand their markets, and redefine themselves. What follows is a sampling of the highlights from Interzum, 2009.

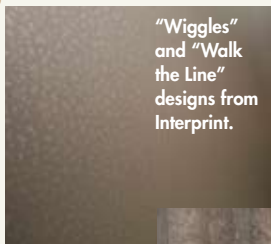
Interprint's Bold Design Launch

Decor printer Interprint chose a different approach to exhibiting its design concepts — nesting them within Design Post, a converted post office that was a two minute walk from the halls of Interzum that now houses 30 elite interior furnishings brands.

"The Design Post provides us with the possibility of not only presenting new décors in isolation but also in interplay with furniture, textiles and accessories of internationally renowned manufacturers," says Interprint managing director Holger Dzeia. "The effect of this interplay will be unique and very inspiring for our customers."

Taking laminates off of the chipboard and out into the real world of design is a bold but long overdue leap, and the Interprint exhibit struck a nerve with attendees. The concept was spearheaded by the company's new marketing manager, Ulrike Lukas.

Many of the new designs on display were printed with cylinders engraved with new laser technology, which the company says delivers higher fidelity results than traditional engraving techniques.



"Wiggles" and "Walk the Line" designs from Interprint.



Renolit's 3D laminates are available in variety of textures.

coloring with traditional surface structures. The Premier collection is Renolit Covaren and offers realistic woodgrain prints, fashionable solid colors and abstract prints, blended with superior surface finishes.

The 3D Custom Solutions product meets the increasing trend to individualization and differentiation. This collection allows clients to select their favored decor and vary it individually or to adapt technical specifications to customer-specific manufacturing processes.

Renolit's stand had several examples of touchable surfaces, from hand-scraped to oiled wood, products with enhanced scratch-resistant properties.

Hettich's Connectors for Lightweight Panels

Hettich unveiled a new kind of solution to connect furniture sides and shelves.

This special connector for lightweight panel furniture construction is designed on the basis of the tried-and-true "Hettinject-System" and flexibly works with all materials used in lightweight building boards. Attached to the side and hidden from view, the "Hettinject VB insert" connects the furniture pieces securely and sturdily. Through its extensor clamp, it can bridge the gaps between furniture faces and board material tolerances.



Blum Easy-Lift Systems

Blum has dramatically increased the user comfort of its Aventos bi-fold lift, up and over lift, lift up and stay lift. Thanks to the "Servo-Drive" electric system, lift systems now open and close as comfortably as Blum's tried and tested pull-out systems. The entire product range was presented for the first time at Interzum.

A gentle touch on fronts suffices to open Blum's lift systems. And they close again just as conveniently at the press of a beautifully designed wireless switch (which is within easy reach in cabinet interiors). The tried and tested "Blumotion" effect, for a soft and silent closing action, comes into play once again. This latest solution is in keeping with the current design trend toward handle-free furniture. Frequently, handle bars were needed to open handle-free furniture. Thanks to "Servo-Drive", wall cabinets can now have flush fronts.

SSI 3-D Laminates

"I've have heard on numerous occasions that design is born in Europe, specifically in the German and Italian markets," says Greg O'Connell of SSI North America. "The trend out of Europe in the last few years has been, and still is, high gloss material. This year's exhibition confirmed that high gloss is still one of the primary desired materials and looks for 3DL."

SSI's parent company, Klockner Pentaplast, displayed many versions of wood grained and solid colored high materials, O'Connell says. While high gloss by itself is in demand and draws attention, so did the polyester version of Klockner's solid-color high gloss materials.

"Vivid solid colors with a near perfectly smooth surface coupled with the fact that it is polyester, really generated interest with show goers. We showed Maranello (red), White, Crème and Black, all incredibly vibrant.

"A new surface design that Klockner introduced and received high interest is a Linen structure. It has the look and feel of linen with three dimensional formability, in metallics and solid colors. Another design introduction by Klockner at Interzum was Teak Amazon, this wood grained design features a textured structure that has depth both in look and feel. The structure itself opens and narrows in unison with the actual printed wood grained design, and in my opinion this design elevates 3DL laminates to another level, not only for Klockner but for the entire industry."



Statuario Venato and Laricio Pinie from Schattdecor.

Schattdecor's Foil Introductions

Schattdecor's stone decor Statuario Venato from its Smartfoil finish foil collection, made a dramatic statement at the company's impressive Interzum stand. The convincing stone design is made more impressive by the new Smartfoil High Gloss finish.

Also new is the company's Posfoil 3D finish, which combine all the advantages of enhanced tactile realism with a distinctive matte/gloss finish. For example, the surface of the woodgrain decor Pinewood recalls sand-blasted wood with its 3-D look, placing it in line with the trend towards pronounced textures.

Schattdecor reports that even in the challenging market climate, the orders from first-time customers are at an all-time high.

Renolit Consolidates 3D Laminate Brands

Under the umbrella Renolit Design, well-known brands Alkor, Benecke-Kaliko and Cova have all found a new home. The Renolit 3D Stock Range is split into two collections: Renolit Alkoren presents the company's selection of solid colors and woodgrains in fashionable

Uniboard Nu Green, A New Standard in Green Particleboard and TFM

No Longer a Niche Product, Environmentally Friendly Panels are Now the Mainstream



The world is growing greener by the day. Manufacturers of furniture and fixtures for commercial interiors know this well, of course, and residential furniture and cabinetry is quickly following suit. Green is not just a trend; it's the new norm in all furniture in all segments.

When it comes to particleboard and TFM panels, there are several ways to make it green — using FSC certified raw materials, recycled wood fiber, high-quality binder resins, and very efficient manufacturing methods. When a panel producer incorporates one or two of these steps, you'd call it good progress. When one incorporates them all, you'd call it Nu Green, from Uniboard.

Launched in 2007, Nu Green sets a new benchmark for environmentally friendly panels.

Some specifics:

- No urea formaldehyde is added in the manufacturing process
- Very low formaldehyde emissions — less than 0.01 ppm
- Made from 100% pre-consumer recycled wood fiber, saving trees and minimizing landfill
- FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified
- EPP (Environmentally Preferable Product) certified by the Composite Panel Association
- Exceeds CARB Phase 2 standards
- Contributes to achieving up to six LEED credits

"The formaldehyde emissions from Nu Green, at 0.01 ppm, are very, very low," says Lise Plante, Product Manager for Uniboard's Panel Business Unit. "That's very near natural oak emissions, which are 0.009 ppm. Some other 'no-urea-formaldehyde-added' particleboard panels, on the other hand, can emit up to 0.14 ppm.

"Our emissions are so low because of our superior resin binder system," says Plante. "The chemical bond between the phenol and formaldehyde components is much stronger than in other formaldehyde-based binder systems."

In addition to being the greenest board on the market, Nu Green is available in all 85 of

Uniboard's melamine colors and designs, and in a variety of dimensions and thicknesses. It also complies with the M2 Grade ANSI standard for moisture-resistant glue, thanks again to its resin technology.

Nu Green is manufactured at Uniboard's facility in Sayabec, Quebec. It is composed mostly of spruce, pine and fir, all recognized for their yield and light weight, and its low density gives it a major advantage.

"We're seeing it increasingly specified for commercial applications, universities and schools, and hospitals and clinics," says Plante. "Of course, it's popular for projects seeking to achieve LEED credits. But it is also being specified for projects that strive just to be 'healthy,' like a large condominium project currently under construction in Toronto.

"Nu Green gives manufacturers a great head start in meeting the market's increasingly high expectations for environmentally friendly furniture and millwork. This is no longer a niche market... it's the mainstream."

For more information on Uniboard and Nu Green, please visit www.uniboard.com, or call (800) 263-5240.

