PARTNERSHIPS AND DISCOVERIES
OPEN NEW MARKETS

Initiated by customer demand nearly a decade ago, the story of how Interprint’s Premeer™ came to be is a story about a company who had the courage to take a risk in a collapsing economy, supported by talented individuals who met each challenge with optimism and a clear vision of how the finalized product could revolutionize the market.

Premeer is a decorative overlay comprised of a specially formulated oriented polypropylene (OPP) with décor printing and electron beam (EB) coating on the front side, and a surface that allows adhesion to various substrates on the reverse.

Ingredients in Premeer’s formula were chosen either to meet a customer’s performance demand, to exceed the performance of a rival product, or overcome a production challenge. Interprint’s Manager of New Product Development, John Gonzabella (see Spotlight, page 24) recalled how the discovery of each ingredient provided momentum as the project progressed, “We kind of had a good feeling about Premeer when these ‘perfect storms’ happened,” Gonzabella explains. “Like when we discovered the same coating that improved wear resistance also solved a production issue. This feeling of destiny was shared by all the partners early on—that’s really what got our juices flowing.”

Like any successful team, the primary partners in the development of Premeer shared a common vision of success. Each partner took risks, accepted challenges and solved problems with the greater good in mind. The involvement of AET Films, manufacturers of the SynDECOR® OPP substrate, goes back seven years and includes the delivery of many pounds of test material and years of product development experience. When small amounts of one compound in the EB coating caused a predecessor of Premeer to fail, MinusNine Technologies got up to speed quickly, investigated the issue and delivered the solution. Accordingly, Interprint, with its investment of time, new equipment (see story, page 14), and vast printing experience, served as ground zero in the development of this truly game-changing product.

BEFORE PREMEER, THERE WAS AQUASEAL

In 2005, customers of the former Canadian manufacturer, CDM, began to ask if the SynDECOR they were coating could also be printed to match other overlays that were being used to decorate the various surfaces on a given piece of furniture. SynDECOR gained popularity in the market for its water resistance, UV stability and gluableity while EB coating added a suitable wear layer that was ultimately adhered with glue to the surfaces of particleboard and MDF boards. CDM first approached Interprint with the opportunity to meet this customer demand. Interprint’s first challenge was that none of its five rotogravure printing machines had ever run anything but fiber-based décor paper. Gonzabella recalls, “At one point, we were told we’d have to buy a film press, but we knew that wasn’t going to happen. We needed to figure out how to configure one of our existing presses to print on OPP, or we were dead in the water.”
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The first challenge was figuring out how to print on such a flexible medium. Rotogravure printing presses use varying tensions throughout the web to control many variables, including registration and the elimination of wrinkles.Controlling these same variables while printing the flexible OPP required operating at tensions much lower than Interprint had ever attempted before. “We didn’t even think our press could operate with such low tensions,” says Genzabilla, “but you never learn if you never try, and much to our surprise, our machines were able to do it.”

After the addition of a corona treater which made the surface of the OPP film more receptive to Interprint’s environmentally-friendly water based inks, CDM had a product they began to coat and ship to their customers under the brand name Aquaseal.

CDM’s Aquaseal product formally launched at the LNF trade show in 2006, but soon afterwards, a near collapse of the U.S. financial system and housing market caused purchasing managers across all industries to become ultra-conservative in their appetite for new products like Aquaseal.

Fast-forward to 2011. Interprint found itself with experience printing on OPP film, but with an undeveloped market. The best course of action in the recovering economy became obvious: reduce costs and provide more value to the customer by bringing EB coating under the same roof as printing. After months of financial analysis and consultation with potential suppliers and partners, Interprint and its Board of Directors approved the investments necessary to modify one of its traditional rotogravure printing presses to apply EB coating in-line.

It’s easy to recite the saying that economic conditions are cyclical, but acting on that belief with investments can be difficult, especially when times are not prosperous and the prospects for success are uncertain. Such risks, however, are necessary to maximize opportunities in better times. Investments have the greatest market share return when made at the bottom of the cycle.

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In October of 2010, when much of the industrialized world was joining the three-year North American recession, the Interprint Group made the decision to invest $2 million in equipment and related costs to produce printed oriented polypropylene (OPP) at Interprint, Inc. in Pittsfield, MA, that would soon be named “Premeer.”

Partnering with the former Canadian manufacturer, CDM, Interprint had already gained some experience printing on OPP. “We invested in a corona treater and had been printing on OPP for some time,” says Interprint’s Co-Managing Director Roland Morin, “but due to the tough economy, the volume of orders was not what we expected.” From time to time, Interprint would print on OPP in Pittsfield, and then bring it across the state to Energy Sciences, Inc. (ESI), in Wilmington to qualify new coatings or other materials they were trialing. Interprint’s Technical Manager, Dave Murray, recalls that one of the most enlightening trips he made to ESI was with a colleague who just happened to be Interprint’s Manager of New Product Development. “John Ganzabella and I were on just another trip to ESI, trying to get a new coating qualified, when it dawned on us: maybe we could apply the coating on OPP right at Interprint.”

Back in Pittsfield, work began to determine the best way to break into the coated OPP business. Morin and his team quickly realized that printing and coating in-line would be the most efficient and least costly production model. As soon as the basic concept was deemed feasible from a manufacturing perspective, Interprint’s sales team set out to conduct deeper market research. “We wanted to present our Board of Directors with not only the cost of the investment, but also the potential return on that investment,” says Co-Managing Director, Bill Hines. “As it turned out, there seemed to be a significant demand for a printed and coated OPP product—as long as the cost was right.”
With the board’s approval to invest, Interprint, Inc. entered 2011 with the goal of producing a new product within one year. With the ability to corona treat and print OPP already, Press #3 emerged as the best candidate to receive the $2M upgrade. “We knew just enough about the process to be dangerous,” jokes Murray, “but we needed a partner that could provide a fully-engineered turnkey solution.” Faustel proved to be more than up to the task. The Germantown, Wisconsin company—well known in many printing industries for its high-quality in-register coaters—agreed to manage the installation for Interprint.

During the first half of 2011, Interprint and Faustel began working out the details and signing the contracts that would bring Premeer to life. The equipment began arriving in October and construction began shortly thereafter. In November, a steel mezzanine was constructed over Press #3, and in December, two critical pieces came together: a Faustel coating and an electron-beam (EB) curing system from ESL. Soon, Interprint’s new EB Coating system was commissioned, and Premeer was born!

By February, customer trials slowly evolved into production orders, the first being a shipment on March 9th to a furniture maker in Canada. Also in March, Interprint secured the services of longtime veterans of the OPP coating industry, Michel Fortin and Bob Stoebe. Fortin, the former Technical Manager of Sales at CDM, brings years of experience to Interprint and a real passion for the industry. “Michel has the unique ability to make even the most mundane technical detail interesting.

He has this excitement about him that has rubbed off on everyone on the Premeer team,” says Genzabolla. Stoebe, a coating expert, joins Interprint after serving as the Director of Business Development at MinusNine Technologies in Gurnee, IL.

Premeer’s development is a direct result of creative and strategic thinking. Interprint’s ability to quickly understand market demands, its courage to invest millions in difficult times, and its valuable mix of equipment and people should allow a product born amongst the clouds of a crippling recession to take the recovering market by storm.