



shifts INCOATINGS

Palm Beach flock coated fabric from Shaw

The coatings and special finishes sector may be on the cusp of change as demand for certain offerings shift from mainly commercial entities into the consumer market. Dawn Adams reports.

Retailers and suppliers may be able to benefit from a largely untapped consumer market for coatings and special finishes in window coverings as the benefits of these fabrics become better known. The fact that their advantages often address issues currently commanding significant public debate is expected to assist their acceptance especially as suppliers begin to more heavily promote their attributes. Intense research and development in this sector will also, no doubt, lead to further breakthroughs that would benefit from greater promotion. As one supplier suggested, coatings and finishes are rarely recognised by consumers unless their attributes are especially highlighted. To the untrained eye, their 'hidden'

features remain invisible unless pointed out.

Past experience in the marketplace has demonstrated that providing extra information to consumers, hungry for more product knowledge, can provide a catalyst for growth. For example, healthcare facilities are increasingly selecting anti-microbial fabrics because they are now commonly regarded as providing an extra barrier to prevent the spread of bacteria. While , commercial interests are often required by government regulation to use fire retardant fabrics, at least one supplier is convinced the benefits of using these fabrics in domestic settings would spark increased demand if sufficient marketing existed to better inform a consumer base.

BRANDING ESSENTIAL FOR GROWTH

Stephen Atherton, Protective Technology managing director, said the firm had adopted a strategy to brand its coatings offerings in Australia rather than refer to its selection in generic terms. The company is promoting its fire retardant option as 'Flamaway', a product it

distributes in Australia for Belgium firm CTF2000. Atherton said this tactic was a way to build demand to a wider audience. "I think it has marketing leverage," he said. "As people become more aware of the protective attributes, I believe they will want them in their home."

Protective Technology has already had significant experience marketing a branded coating option through Ultra-Fresh which it has distributed locally since 1993. Atherton suggested its anti-microbial properties were increasingly being sought after and specified for use as they were seen as capable of creating a barrier against the spread of infection. "The healthcare sector is asking for Ultra-Fresh because they're concerned about cross infection," he said. Ultra-Fresh has enjoyed a lengthy and high profile entry into the market with its presence in mattresses, foams and carpet underlays ensuring its attributes became better known across industry sectors leading to its broader use in areas like hosiery and socks. "Once you have a critical mass knowing enough about the coating, you start to receive enquires from other areas asking if it's →

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appropriate to use in their fields,” Atherton said.

Also in the company’s range are acrylic polymers used create flame retardant and anti-microbial coatings or for thickening purposes or UV absorption . “If a fabric tends to yellow, UV absorbing can be in the formulation; this won’t allow UV to break down the fibre or the polymer,” said technical sales director Andrew Mould. “The acrylic polymers dictate the stiffness of a blind, you don’t want a roman blind that has to roll up properly and tighten to be too stiff but a venetian requires a higher degree of stiffness because you don’t want curling on the edges and you want a certain drape.”

FLOCK COATING FROM SHAW

Shaw is using the flock coating method for its core fabric ranges including Urbanshade, Yoko and Palm Beach. The company also recently invested significantly in improving output from its New Zealand coating plant to cope with increased demand for flock coated fabrics.

The company’s Sarah Harris said flock coating was not considered a mainstream method of backing fabric

suggesting most fabric coaters used a foamed acrylic backing only preferring to avoid the additional process due to its complexity.

“Flock coating is a three pass procedure; a tinted coat is applied to the base cloth, followed by a blackout coat, and then an ivory coat,” she said. “The viscose/cotton blend flock fibre is applied to this final coat by dropping the fibers through an electro-statically charged field onto the fabric. “

Harris said flocking was a difficult process to perfect. “The accuracy and evenness of this fibre application determines the quality and performance of the finished fabric,” she said. “It is this challenging element of the coating process which makes it less likely to be copied, particularly by Asian fabric manufacturers.”

The result, Harris, claimed was a tactile finish in keeping with a worldwide trend towards a soft furnishing appearance roller blind. “With a ‘soft to touch’ look and feel, flock coating is functional and aesthetically appealing,” she said. “Furthermore, it has handling advantages, particularly on the cutting table.” **WFA**

Investment from Louvolite

Louvolite has also demonstrated a commitment to investment in new machinery as well as research and development to create new textile coating offerings. It points to its facility in northwest England as capable of producing kilometres of finished or part finished fabric as well as printing, laminating and pleating processes. The company claimed this fabric division had developed into a “veritable cathedral” of calm and order with plenty of space and ample evidence of ongoing investment. However, the firm acknowledged that this was not always the case. In its early days, the company purchased second hand and sometimes, third or fourth hand equipment. Its founder Reg Allsopp and his team of engineers would transform old textile finishing equipment into integrated units capable of applying the necessary liquors to base fabrics to help turn them into textiles for blinds. “Initial trials were not only costly in terms of the time taken to produce the product but also in the volume of base fabric that would be used to run the trial,” the company said. It claimed this persistence, even when money was tight, led to the firm becoming proficient coaters of window shade textiles.

Expansion in the area included purchasing an additional 100,000 square foot property to house its fabrics division, known as Crossley Road, where further investment in equipment and procedures has included a computer controlled colour laboratory to provide batch-to-batch colour consistency. Production waste

treatment plants were designed and built to ensure Louvolite met any requirements regarding ‘green issues’. State-of-the-art equipment was acquired to provide more efficient and effective pleating and printing functions and the whole site was upgraded to allow more efficient movement and storage of finished and unfinished textiles.

“Louvolite prides itself in pushing the barriers in textile performance and appearance,” the company said. Its four Stenters allow the company to apply a wide variety of finishing techniques to a myriad number of textile types. “Proprietary fabric coatings such as SPC (Solar Performance Coating) endow fabrics with significantly improved solar and optical performance, foam coating provides blackout a blackout finish capable of providing full privacy and total opacity,” it said. “Where delicate textiles require a gentle gossamer of coating to retain the special effects that only yarns and fibre can convey Louvolite’s experience and patience allow it to achieve success where others cannot.”

The firm’s laboratory also includes equipment required to assess full solar and optical performance to internationally recognised standards, flame retardancy and light fastness. It has new equipment which creates artificial climate conditions to ensure products can perform in areas of the world where the climate provides particular challenges. It even machine washes test fabric to recognised standards. **WFA**