

From recycled PET to 'code for luxury'

Converting recycled plastics bottles into luxury packaging is an admirable ambition, but one French company is making it happen.

Dominique Huret reports

There are factory visits that cannot be forgotten. Timeless and yet modern, traditional and industrial at the same time, French ribbon manufacturer Sin-Rejac is unique. Organza, coarse grain and satin, coloured and shiny, these ribbons from the biggest luxury brands names just glitter everywhere.

The origin of the family business dates from 1947 when it was dedicated to printing. In the 1980s, Jacques Hurfin merged two companies: Sin, which specialised in printing, and Rejac, which was dedicated to weaving clothes labels. Gradually, weaving and ribbon printing became a niche specialty. Following the involvement of his two sons – Pierre Yves and Jean-Philippe – in the company, and thanks to rapid growth, a new factory was opened in 1993 in Wattrelos, 20km north of Lille. That same year, Sin-Rejac set up its head office in Paris on the beautiful Avenue de l'Opéra.

Today, Sin-Rejac is the world leader in printed ribbon, present in many sectors: cosmetics, jewellery, tableware, leather goods, fine chocolate, and floristry. "With two production sites in France, four subsidiaries abroad, 50 people directly employed and 50 subcontracted, we remain a small-to-medium-sized enterprise (SME)," explains Jean-Philippe Hurfin, general manager. "Our annual turnover is around €10 million (\$10.8m) and 99 per cent of our customers come from the luxury sector. Measured in terms of length, our ribbon production is 40 million km, which is the circumference of the earth."

The visit begins in the large weaving workshop in Comines, a traditional textile town straddling Belgium and France. Inside the plant, out of sight and the noisy weavers, in the middle of the PE granule bags stands the huge extruder that produces polyethylene thread or yarn. The company produces most of its portfolio in-house, but does import some ready-made ribbon from Turkey and Egypt.

The weaving stage follows and takes up most of the production site. "We still use a few

very old shuttle looms, which are unique, robust and easily-repaired machines," says Hurfin. "But of course, with the increase in demand we have had to buy new, more efficient weaving machines. It was not easy and we had to ask a Japanese manufacturer to come over to fully understand what we were after. Today most of our production is in polyethylene. Contrary to common belief, it is the type of weaving that gives the ribbon its texture and not the base material. A 'coarse grain' finish is not necessarily made of cotton, and a 'satin' or 'muslin' ribbon not always composed of polyester."

In the workshop, there is a festival of colour, with many of the branded colour schemes instantly recognisable. On the day of the visit, many looms featured the red ribbon of Cartier, the green of Longchamp and the white Chanel. In addition, countless lengths of neutral or white polyester landed in large cardboard boxes in flexible coils.

"We produce ribbons year-round and continuously for Hermès, for which we are the exclusive supplier," adds dynamic company president Pierre-Yves Hurfin. "The cotton of its emblematic brown ribbon comes to us from India already dyed. For our most important customers, we import the yarn already dyed. For others, it is the dyeing workshop a few hundred metres away that takes care of it."

Dyed, dried, calendared and prepared in labelled boxes, the ribbons are ready to go into the third step. Printing takes place a few kilometres from Comines, in the Sin-Rejac factory in Wattrelos.

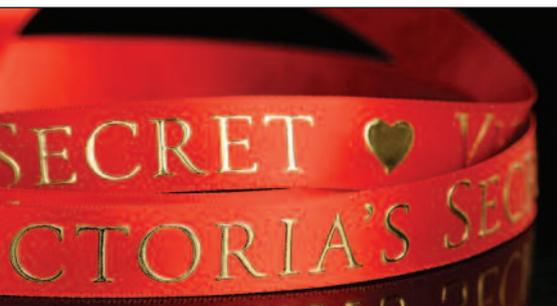
"On these ribbons, we print 'flat' or in 'relief' with proprietary technology and inks," he continues. "Heavy laser-engraved steel cylinders grind black ink with an astonishing white powder appearance. Since 1946, inks have been manufactured in-house. Thanks to this, we have been able to develop a direct relief printing technique using 100 per cent organic and biodegradable inks. The innovation was presented at last year's Luxe Pack show."



The printing is performed on acetate or polyester satin, cotton, coarse grain or muslin ribbons, while the number of colours is almost infinite: gold, silver, tone-on-tone, iridescent reliefs, multi-coloured, all across the Pantone reference frame in lacquer or matt. Strolling around the printing workshop, Jean-Philippe Hurfin has a sharp eye for detail. And precision is important, even down to 0.1mm on ribbons as narrow as 5mm. A defect in the centering of the printing, the slightest deviation in a colour or defect in the 3D process must all be picked up.

Customisation is offered as an option, with Sin-Rejac producing up to 200,000m of customised tape every day. Hermès, for example, has collaborated on one or two new ribbon themes per year for the past 20 years. Others brands favour a unique ribbon per fragrance in a portfolio which might number as many as 40 variants.

Tone-on-tone or duo ribbons are on-trend at the moment, but unlimited creativity means ever-changing constraints. To navigate this, the production manager has a method whereby



Customers include prestige brands Harrods, Victoria's Secret, Cellier and Crème de la Crème



Sin-Rejac is spinning a yarn in France



Jean-Philippe Hurfin has a sharp eye for detail

print experts are brought together to brainstorm and find collaborative solutions.

Exports, mainly to Italy and the Gulf countries, represent nearly half of all sales, compared to just 20 per cent two decades ago, and Sin Rejac has the ambitious objective of reaching 60 per cent within five years. Asia is at the centre of the current export effort; unsurprisingly, Japan is famous for its gift-giving culture and ribbons can add to the attractiveness of packaging. Chinese competitors exist but are mainly focused on low-cost ribbons.

Bottle-to-ribbon recycling

"Another underlying trend is the 'sustainable' ribbon, but producing these in France with expensive labour and material is not an option," says Pierre-Yves Hurfin. "We have now started producing recycled PET ribbon from plastics bottles in China. In the Shanghai region, five collection centres gather PET bottles, clean and melt them, and produce a recycled yarn that can be woven into most qualities of ribbon. They are then dyed and

printed like any other yarn. In addition to ribbons, sustainable clothing or garment labels are in high demand. We believe in constant innovation to stay in step with the market."

Its approach to this end gives the company complete control of its production chain. Rather than rely on third-party certifications to justify the environmental credentials of its raw materials, Sin-Rejac maintains control over the polyester threads from which its eco-ribbons are made. The threads come from plastics bottles collected from a network of local recycling points, ensuring complete traceability and Global Recycling Standard (GRS) certification.

He refers back to the company's proud history book of orders for luxury items from the Emirates to Asia-Pacific markets. "A ribbon is not only an accessory," he insists. "It represents a sophistication considered essential by some as the ultimate touch to a package or a garment. It's the first thing one sees, a code for luxury."

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