

# Stamping Out Sustainability

## Looking Deeper at the Designer's Palette of Decoration Options

By Wendy Jedlicka, CPP

**F**or designers wanting to move in a more sustainable direction, these days the list of what you cannot do seems to be getting longer, while understanding what you can do is still a work in progress. One thing everyone agrees on, though, is the idea of making more use of fewer materials and resources.

The idea of “less = more” has been at the core of many highly refined forms of expression for centuries. Today, the too popular opposite idea is “grab as much shelf facing as you can and hold on to it whether or not the product really requires that amount of physical space.”

### Doing more with less

In Japan, a small but well selected grouping of flowers and greens create the visual calm that is the essence of a tokonoma display — a niche or an alcove in a Japanese home for highlighting the beauty of a single object. This small presentation has much more impact on and emotional connection to the viewer than a dozen roses jammed in a vase. Another example is how the classic little black dress became a classic because it was simple, elegant, and required very few accessories to make a bold statement.

When looking to connect with an upscale buyer, the glint of metalized foil on a package has been the go-to signal for designers serving this market for decades. But as we get further and further into understanding how various techniques to decorate packaging impacts end-of-life resource recovery ease, bonding metals and plastics to otherwise easily recyclable substrates becomes an issue.

Over the years, some designers and converters have gone too far, using full-coverage foil-laminated boards and printing opaque ink over the top rather than using selective spot applications of foil to achieve the same effect. In some product segments, like toothpaste, “sparkle” is so overused that the most noticeable brands on a retailer's shelf are the ones not using foil, rather than ones that are. Tom's of Maine, for example, pops like an island of calm in an otherwise blindingly glimmering field.

As designers shift their attention to deeper issues like resource type and use, the Foil & Specialty Effects Association (FSEA) understands well the implications of what this shift in resource use means for its industry, and has begun working to get in front of sustainability issues,

In 2008, the FSEA commissioned an independent research firm, Pira International, of Surrey, England, to do an assessment of just how much of an impact foil stamping had on recyclability. FSEA Executive Director Jeff Peterson points out, “It has become quite apparent that this study is extremely important to the long-term health of our industry and association.”

Available through its website ([www.fsea.com](http://www.fsea.com)), the “Repulability of Foil-Decorated Paper” report details the 2008 Pira International study and describes the base methodology: Pira foil-stamped paper and board with the more traditional hot foil process, and included foil-decorated products that represented 25% to 100% post-consumer waste (PCW). It then put those samples through the recycling process.

The main conclusion of the study found that paper products selectively decorated by both the traditional hot stamp and new cold foil processes are still very much recyclable. Repulping facilities that use centrifugal cleaners (hydrocyclones) to better remove all types of adhesives, laminates, bindery remnants, and labels — a process used in many markets — have little problem removing selectively applied foils.

Using systems thinking though, and looking deeper — leaving out the foil, but looking at the stamping process — embossing and debossing can add dimensionality and interest to a piece without impacting recyclability and can, depending on the application, be more effective on the store shelf than adding additional inks or foils. The tactile quality of a package is an important and often overlooked “color” in the packaging designer's pallet. Getting a product into a consumer's hand, and then sealing the deal with a well considered feel, is a very effective tool to get people to the final step of taking the product home. To do all that without adding resources impacting recyclability is a truly elegant solution indeed. ■

*The Sustainability Update is coordinated by Wendy Jedlicka, CPP – Jedlicka Design Ltd. ([www.jedlicka.com](http://www.jedlicka.com)) o2 International Network for Sustainable Design ([www.o2.org](http://www.o2.org) and [www.o2umw.org](http://www.o2umw.org)), Minneapolis College of Art and Design's groundbreaking Sustainable Design Certificate Program ([www.mcad.edu/sustainable](http://www.mcad.edu/sustainable)).*