

parodi on paperhanging

Contractor to Manufacturers: Start Making Sense

by Jim Parodi

David Byrne of the Talking Heads had already told us by the 1980s that "there is water at the bottom of the ocean." At least he was considerate enough to let us know he had stopped making sense. Nowadays you don't even have to give anybody a heads up on that... you can stop making sense and nobody bats an eye.

For instance, as I was vacuuming up cat hair the other day trying to reposition strategically placed duct tape on my Sears Kenmore machine, I noticed that on the attachment door of the machine were emblazoned the words "Limited Edition." Now how stupid does Sears think I am? OK, I was stupid enough to think that the vacuum cleaner would last for more than the one year warranty, but is it possible that at the factory they are actually producing only a limited number of these things?

Cue the wavy dream lines....

A man dressed head-to-toe in artsy black with a Salvador Dali moustache spits into the phone from the conveyor belt room, "No! Tell zem eet ees not posseeble. We ave only zo many of zeese macheen. I ave personally signed and numbeared each of zeese Zeers vaccums cleaners. Now bug off! Zut alors!"

Anybody who cares to notice can tell you that the wallpaper industry stopped making sense years ago, too. They gave us prepasteds that need pre-pasted activator, universal primers that shouldn't be used universally, non-staining adhesives that stain, and the new, dubious savior of withering sales — the nonwovens. If you have up to now avoided the happy talk and bubbly infomercials regarding the nonwovens, the National Guild of Professional Paperhangers defines them as follows:

"Non woven wallcovering substrates are produced on a paper machine from a mixture of long fiber cellulose pulps and textile fibers combined with binders. The web is reinforced with acrylates and pigments are added to provide opacity.

Special additives are used to provide wet strength and absorbency. Non wovens provide a substrate that is dimensionally stable when wet thus allowing a paste the wall technique to be used for hanging."



Windex passes right through a nonwoven wallcovering.

There are many advantages to using these breathable nonwovens. One advantage is that their dry strength allows them to be dry stripped from the wall. Every marketer includes that feature in their talking points because removability tops the list of consumer concerns. (Of course, fabric backed vinyls have been dry strippable since the Eisenhower Administration, but marketers are pretending that this feature is a recently invented technology. Gotta "sell the sizzle" as Mad Avenue folks say.) Nonwovens are also more dimensionally stable from wet to dry so they don't open up the worm can of poor paint adhesion by shrinking at the seams and pulling paint off.

So what's my beef with a product that has these advantages? None whatsoever. The problem is that the disadvantages of this material are being sweetly glossed over by the marketing folks of every manufacturer. Surprised? Me neither.

In the early part of this decade our industry was assaulted by a brewing media hysteria about mold and mildew. Breathable nonwoven material was seen as a magic bullet

to conquer black mold growing behind sheet vinyls in the Mold Belt — that region stretching from Florida up around the Gulf Coast states and then back down the Texas coast.

By being super loose and breathable, the nonwovens would breathe health back into those markets by venting A/C-induced moisture from the wall cavity through the wallcovering.

There remains, however, a completely different environment in the Midwest, Northwest, West Coast, and Northeast whose inhabitants for decades have not counted behind-the-paper-mold as an issue.

Every company is marketing the nonwovens as the solution to EZ installation and EZ removal, but they give short shrift to the period of time between the installation and the removal. This begs the question: "What experience are the consumers likely to have when they use nonwovens in their homes?"

The photo to the left shows what happens when you press the nozzle of a Windex sprayer against a plain nonwoven and pull the spritzer lever. The nonwoven material reveals itself to be as watertight as a screen door. A stream of liquid passes right through it.

Breathability fanatics will gush, "That's great. You could have a broken water pipe in the wall and the water will pass right through the wallcovering!" I suppose. But what about situations where the source of moisture is not from behind the wall (as is the case in the Non-Mold Belt of the United States — roughly 98 percent of our land mass?) Is it a good thing when every time someone in the bath takes a shower, the paste behind the nonwoven is completely saturated? What if the consumer wants to scrub down an area around a toilet with a bucket of Mr. Clean?

Problems of watermarking with nonwovens hit the paperhanging rooms of the internet almost the minute they were born. Some who have papered around a vanity or

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pedestal sink post photos of mineral rich water traveling up the sheet with Bounty-like pickerupability and then drying to an unsightly white watermark on a dark ground nonwoven.

My own personal run-in with the breathability/absorption quirk of nonwovens occurred as I installed it in a kitchen. I somehow got what looked like an oil spot right in the middle of a sheet at eye level. When



1 Ready to test

I tried to clean it, it the situation just got worse. This later led me to perform a simple test of how a breathable nonwoven fared in a duel with cooking oil and a stop watch. The sequence of photos 1-5 shows how an inked nonwoven behaved:



2 Cooking oil immediately soaks into paper.

And you thought the Exxon Valdez had a problem with oil? After a mere 5 seconds (Fig.2) the oil had started to darken the surface, after 32 seconds (Fig.3), the flip side revealed that the oil had completely penetrated to the back side. At 56 seconds (Fig.4) we're not going to be able to hide it from Mom anymore and at one minute seventeen seconds (Fig.5), the oil had pooled on the flip side in an oil lake that would make the Saudis envious.

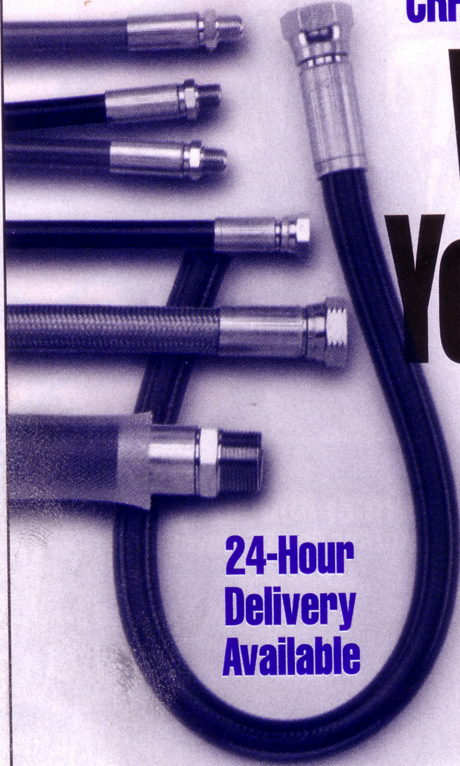


3 Oil penetrates to back side.

Go ahead and call me a party pooper. The rest of the wallpaper world is breaking open champagne bottles in the dining room fêting nonwovens and I'm here in the kitchen trying to avoid getting fired for accidentally splashing soy sauce on the nonwoven around the garbage can. You see, nonwoven producers have pinned their hopes on a very flimsy premise, i.e. that super permeability *is super in all environments*. Clearly it isn't. But there is hope.

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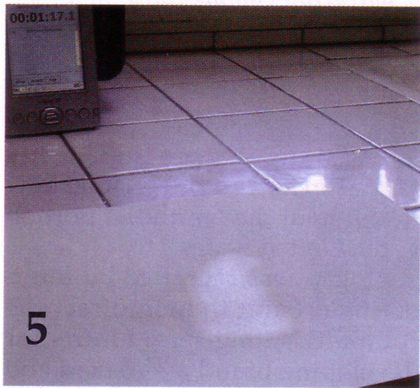
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4
One minute — can't hide.

If you check out the new nonwoven collections you will find some which have been sealed to varying degrees, mainly for printing purposes. Not all of them are like the screen door I've shown here. (Best performing brands for water and oil resistance in my limited tests have been York SureStrip and Chesapeake/Blonder Easy-Walls.) Sadly though, many of the name brands are as bad as my above pictorial.



5
Oil pools behind paper.

So, rather than marketing *all* non-wovens as the new *wunderwallcovering*, I'm thinking that it would behoove the makers to differentiate for the consumer between sealed non-wovens and unsealed nonwovens and provide a usage chart for the various nonwoven types. I'm guessing that failure to make this essential distinction among buyers early on in the marketing campaign will put the words "non woven wallpaper" into that linguistic pantheon inhabited by the terms "Edsel", "Yugo", "New Coke", and "Cold Fusion."

How to Handle

Just like in a family, the problem child gets all the attention. Let's concentrate on what the hanger should do with this brat called unsealed nonwoven:

Once you know just how quickly this stuff can get trashed you should

plan for extreme cleanliness during the installation. Some makers coat and seal their product and others don't. Some pre-paste them, others don't. Some instruct the hanger to dip in water and others to paste the wall. The first thing to do is to spend a few minutes to find out just how breathable/ sieve-like your sample is. Spray Windex or WD-40 (both rapid penetrators) on the surface, wait 5 minutes and then inspect the flip side. No evidence of penetration? Great. Treat this material as

you would a traditional solid vinyl. It's going to be an EZ day.

But what if there is evidence of rapid penetration on the flip side? Plan on pasting the wall. You have seen how quickly these unsealed nonwovens transmit liquid and you can probably guess that paste dilution should be kept to an absolute minimum, too.

Rather than slow yourself down by waiting for moisture to flash off the paste for each piece, paste the

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walls of the whole room first thing. Depending on drying conditions you'll be ready to hang in an hour or so. Then, as you hang the room, repaste the small section of the wall you are working. You will see the paste "dull" immediately as it loses moisture so there will be a lesser chance of paste ooze infiltration through the nonwoven and at the seams.

As a side note, the claim by a few companies that nonwovens don't expand or contract is, at times, uh...let's say counterfactual. It's true that nonwovens generally don't expand as much as paper or paperbacked products but the expansion value *is not zero* with a few. If there is too much moisture in your paste, you can get an expansion bubble here and there. A good way to prevent this is to wipe the back of the sheets with a medium damp sponge and let them sit for a

while rolled up like cigars for 10-15 minutes before going to the wall. I have had best results with nonwovens using that old low-moisture favorite-clay.

Even though our half-baked marketers have stopped making sense by hawking nonwovens as everything to everyone, you can get ahead of this curve by using some common sense. What happens in the future with Jane Consumer after the Wesson Oil hits the fan is anybody's guess. *PWC*

Jim Parodi is a second-generation paperhanger based in Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY. An NGPP member since 1987, he also is a member of The Bergen County Mastercraftsman Paint and Paper Association in the suburbs of New York City. His penetrating commentary on all aspects of the wallcovering industry regularly graces the pages of PWC.

News—

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West. Favorable weather patterns in the Northeast in January helped boost starts there by 8.9 percent. All four regions, however, reported a pace of construction well below a year earlier.

David Berson, chief economist of Fannie Mae, and Frank Nothaft, chief economist of Freddie Mac, said that they don't expect to see the beginning of an upturn materialize until a quarter or two behind Seiders' forecast, with gradual improvement likely in this year's second half.

International Paint LLC Targets Energy and Power Markets

International Paint LLC, a division of Akzo Nobel, hired Terry Hogan to serve as their new OEM

Sales Manger over the energy and alternative power markets throughout the Northeast portion of the United States.

Hogan was recruited by International Paint to help direct the company's long-term efforts for developing brand awareness and growth of International's high-performance protective coatings sales in the energy and power markets in that region.

"We are delighted to have Terry on our engineering team," said Ian Rowell, International Paint's vice president of sales and engineering. "He not only brings valuable technical and marketing expertise to the table, but a unique insight into the needs of our growing clientele in these market spaces."

A coatings industry veteran of more than 16 years, Hogan was previously employed as an OEM Specialist at Carboline Inc. for five years, with another 10 years served at Ameron and Dupont. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in business and marketing from Central Connecticut State University. *PWC*