

Södra PulpLabs:

Putting innovation into practice

Anna Altner must have one of the most interesting jobs in the pulp industry. As head of Södra's interactive innovation website, PulpLabs, and in charge of the DuraPulp project, she really is at the forefront of innovation when it comes to new applications for pulp.

INNOVATION

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On trend, cutting edge and avant garde are not words that spring to mind immediately when you think of market pulp. But Europe's largest market pulp supplier is changing all that. Its interactive website, PulpLabs, is fast becoming a forum for innovation that is taking pulp beyond the traditional and into new areas for the future.

The idea for PulpLabs came out of conversations with Södra's creative agency, Garbergs and grew steadily in project form for two years as a way of keeping the world notified of Södra's innovation concepts for pulp. It is a joint production between Södra's sales and marketing arm, Södra Cell International, and its R&D team, Södra Innovation – a clear recognition that the two must work closely together these days to survive in a fast-changing marketplace.

Altner had been managing a fibre line within Södra when she saw the opportunity to do something different. "I wanted to be involved with the more visionary side of the company," she says, "and this was a great chance. Ulf Edman, then head of Södra Cell's marketing arm, wanted new ideas and projects to be taken seriously and investigated, to see if they could ever come to market. PulpLabs is a way of talking directly to all within the chain and those at the end of it, to find out what vision others have for a new material. It's unusual to involve more links in the chain this early in a process, but we think it greatly speeds up the process of getting a new product to market. It also means we get to expand our field of competence beyond what we know, which is fibre."



Södra Innovation is exploring the potential of cellulose both for traditional as well as new markets.

The site is now attracting over 2,000 visitors per month, including hits from 287 universities. It is supported by visits to various trade fairs and focus group initiatives for individual projects. But Altner would like to see it go further. "It's my job to ensure PulpLabs is regarded as the place where innovation and the market meet. This is happening but we want to make it even more simple for anyone to engage with us and with each other over a new idea. It's not just for new customers and ideas either. We hope existing customers will see it as a chance to work with branding and innovations, a chance to market themselves as innovators for the future. We believe in the future. We want to exist in the future. Fibre is what we know and do. We know it's not enough to just be the last man standing. We have to be proactive and we have to act now, both in our existing markets and in discovering new ones. We have been too traditional in this value chain, we need to broaden out, even for exis-

» *Altner's job is to explore innovation in all senses of the word when it comes to pulp and paper. Part of the job at PulpLabs is to reduce the time it takes to bring an innovative idea out of the lab and into the market."*

ting products, to cope with change faster, to work with and understand our customers' customers, as well as our suppliers. We have to know what the end user wants before we develop new products but we don't really have much experience of launching genuinely new products. That says a lot about the pulp and paper industry. We have a lot to learn from other industries who have adapted to changing markets. This is a meeting point to encourage connections."

Combining marketing and innovation is not a new concept but it is rarely put into practice. Experience with PulpLabs so far, however, has shown that when it happens, it is extremely useful. Södra plans to launch a stronger pulp for tissue producers later this year, for example, but it needed to talk to customers first to find out if they really would value such an addition.

DuraPulp: A success story

A prime example of PulpLabs in action is Södra's new biodegradable composite of cellulose and a corn polymer called DuraPulp. "We don't know where we will be in 50 years," reflects Altner, "but we do know we have to start somewhere to reduce our demands on the world's finite resources. DuraPulp was born from the drive to come up with biodegradable, renewable alternatives to plastics."



"The great thing about working with new materials is the chance to find non-traditional partners and see things in a new way."

ANNA ALTNER Manager PulpLabs

Born: Hofors, Sweden **Status:** Married, two children, aged 3 and 6 **Lives:** In the countryside, just outside Värö **Education:** MSc Chemical engineering, Lund University **Works:** Between production and innovation – at Värö (where DuraPulp is made) and Växjö (Södra International's base) **Experience:** Joined Södra in 2003, formerly fibre line manager. **Likes:** Horse riding, nature

DuraPulp has been on the PulpLabs radar since its launch and has attracted considerable interest – so much so that the company has now started commercial production. To show what could be done with the material, Södra made a chair and a lamp in collaboration with external partners (although Södra itself has no intention of moving into furniture design). "We had this brand new material, we were convinced it had massive potential but we weren't

sure what we could do with it," Altner explains. "We put it on the website, made a chair and a lamp from it and before we knew it, we were winning international awards and getting enquiries from all walks of life." Wästberg, the Swedish lighting company selling the lamp, has orders for 1,000 units on its books.

Södra is interested in what the material could do within packaging and speciality grades. A key customer is currently in talks about

its possible use as well as a number of smaller contacts. But the point about DuraPulp is that its potential is huge, both within applications in the industry and beyond. "Now we have to talk to customers about how to convert and work with the material," Altner says. "Moulded packaging is the next step we're looking at since DuraPulp could be run through existing converting lines, and we'll be attending major packaging exhibitions in an effort to

» *Södra Cell's interactive website, PulpLabs, has had a facelift, making it easier than ever to join the of the lab and into the market.*"

show future customers what potential we think we have here. PulpLabs has really proved its worth as a tool for the innovation process: we knew we had a really promising material, but where would the customers come from, what would they use it for? It's not paper, it's not plastic, how can we convert it in the value chain? PulpLabs is helping us find the answers and shortening the time to get DuraPulp to the market."

Primarily, the idea is to sell DuraPulp in bales but it could also be layered in a carton for strength, with the obvious advantage over plastic of a neutral carbon footprint.

Coming next: FoamPulp

The second challenge viewers can follow on PulpLabs is FoamPulp – a pulp which has been foamed to produce a material with excellent insulating properties. Again, the company has teamed up with an outside partner to show what might be done with the material. This time, its visionary Swedish sports gear producer, POC, a young environmentally-conscious leader in protective gear for extreme sports. The team intend to make a crash jacket with disposable crash pads which can be disposed of and replaced as needed. The jacket will be ready for a major outdoor sports fair, ISPO, in Germany next year. This follows on from a project with design students at the Royal College of Art in London who came up with everything from biodegradable bike helmets to bubble wrap and office partitions.

"We don't intend to start making ski wear," Altner emphasises. "It may seem crazy, but this is the great thing about working with new materials: the chance to find non-traditional partners and see things in a new way."

While the ski jacket will attract attention to FoamPulp, it too is showing potential for a wide range of applications within the industry. Altner's team conducted a series of focus groups within the packaging chain to explore ideas and demands for the future, in cooperation with Opticom Reserch International. Aptly called Future Labs, the pro-

ject was unusual in that it involved all positions in the value chain for a material which is not even yet in commercial production.

Top-level decision makers who were intimately familiar with the problems and requirements facing their respective areas were asked to meet and discuss the potential they saw in FoamPulp, from brand owners and packaging design agencies to logistics companies, converters and the environmental movement.

Staged and hosted by Opticom, a total of eight round table meetings were held - four in Sweden, two in the UK and two in Germany. A clear demand emerged for the type of material from which FoamPulp is made. Whether or not such demand existed was the main question Södra wanted answering.

"A lot of other things emerged from the project that are very valuable to us," Altner reflects. "For example, we now have an extensive list containing a large number of interesting people in what is for

Not all of the ideas in PulpLabs will make it to the market but some just might ...

us a completely new segment, who will be very valuable to have in our network in the future. We contacted several of them after the project and have had some interesting discussions. We've also set up a special group on the LinkedIn social network website where all members can log in and communicate with each other, which really delivers significant added value for the entire project, both for us and the participants. "The Future Lab project has also enabled us to put the company on the map and strengthen our brand in the minds of significant parts of the packaging segment value chain. Colleagues from Södra Innovation sat in an adjacent room during all eight Future Lab meetings, getting immediate feedback from the packaging industry in terms of the perspectives and requirements they had for FoamPulp, which has proved to be very valuable indeed," concludes Altner. "This is the way forward."

To join the debate, log on at www.sodrapulplabs.com ■

