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Contributing Writer

Embroidery Stabilizers GO Green

Manufacturers have not only developed more earth-friendly wet-laid stabilizers, some decorators are choosing them first for their superior performance.

Biodegradable Green

Tearaway Washaway is ideal for embroidery where both sides of the item show such as napkins, towels and linens. Once embroidery is finished, the stabilizer tears cleanly away and residue is removed by dabbing remnants with a damp washcloth or rag. This biodegradable material dissolves in water and has no harmful effect on the environment. *Photo courtesy of Cotswold Industries, New York.*

You already recycle the paper in your shop. You avoid wasting electricity, water and gasoline. But there's only so much you can do to be environmentally conscious when it comes to decorating. After all, you have to use the materials provided by suppliers. Fortunately, the list of vendors that are adding eco-friendly items to their various product categories grows every day. And today decorators can add one more category of supplies to the host of earth-friendly materials — embroidery stabilizers.

In part due to consumer demand, manufacturers are using benign binder chemistries to make backing materials, avoiding APEs (alkyl

phenol ethoxylate) and formaldehydes. They're also using raw materials that have been grown and harvested in a sustainable manner. Further, they're using recycled materials such as PET bottles. These changes use fewer resources and have a less-negative impact on the environment and people.

Early this year, Cotswold Industries, New York, introduced its line of environmentally friendly embroidery backings, which is available directly or through distributors such as American Embroidery Supply, Atlanta, and others. You can find brands of similar biodegradable backings available from various vendors and distributors.

While Cotswold doesn't use certified organic materials to create stabilizers, it does use renewable materials — primarily cellulose wood pulp. Typically, wet-laid stabilizer has been made from fibers that are polyester and cellulose.

As part of the manufacturing process, fibers are combined in a "chest," where they are mixed with water and laid on





A big advantage of the Biodegradable Green tearaway is it tears so cleanly, you may not need to dissolve remnants with water afterwards. David Sklar, Ballyhoo, Arlington, Va., finds his customers are satisfied with it just being torn away. "If there is a chunk left, I just pull it off with tweezers," he says.

a rotating wire screen (hence the term wet-laid). The water is then driven off, leaving a fiber web that's uniform in all directions. The web is dried, and a binder is applied for strength. Lubricants are added in the binder formulation, which improves sewing efficiency and design registration.

Such earth-friendly manufacturing processes are a big change from just a short time ago, when many stabilizer suppliers used raw materials inefficiently and incorporated fibers harvested in an unsustainable way.

GIVE AND TAKE

This eco-friendly perspective doesn't come without its challenges, however. For instance, the manufacturing process is more costly. But this is a small price to pay for contributing to an improved environment. However, efforts are being made to work with suppliers to lower costs of these materials to the same as those of non-recycled options.

Thankfully, using environmentally friendly stabilizers should have

no effect on the material's quality and performance, suppliers say.

Debbie Whyte, owner of Whyte House Monograms, a retail embroidery/monogram gift shop in Chevy Chase, Maryland, switched to biodegradable stabilizer primarily for its performance characteristics. "Choosing the right stabilizer has been the hardest part of this business for me," says Whyte. "My customers are pretty picky. They do not want to see any stabilizer on the back."

Because Whyte embroiders a lot of items that end users want to display both sides of, such as Irish linen hand towels, handkerchiefs, bath towels and sheets, it's crucial that her tearaway rip cleanly and that any remnants can be dissolved with water. "My customers will not accept anything with a wrinkle or puckering, and even on items such as purses, where the backing is in the inside, nothing can show."

Once she has finished completing the embroidery, she tears away excess stabilizer and then dabs or rubs the edges with a damp washcloth to

This hooped item is a lightweight polo shirt that, according to Sklar, requires two pieces of Tearaway Washaway with a layer of no-show mesh in order to have enough support for small lettering in a left chest logo.

"I'd rather be eco conscious than not," says

Sklar, who uses mostly biodegradable stabilizer in his shop.



remove the remainder. She stocks all three weights at her shop (1.5 ounce, 2 ounce and 2.5 ounce) and uses it for almost all her stabilizer needs. In addition to linens, towels and sheets, she also embroiders on quilted tennis racket covers, a wide range of children's wear, and all kinds of bags.

Travis Clark, United Printables & Promotions, Carrollton, Texas, agrees with Whyte. "A biodegradable stabilizer is a great idea when considering how much stabilizer goes in the dumpster," Clark says. "The Tearaway Washaway is ideal for applications such as bags, denims and twills."

David Sklar, owner, Ballyhoo, Arlington, Va., also prefers biodegradable backing because he found that it



Debbie Whyte, Whyte House Monograms, Chevy Chase, Md., has found that eco-friendly stabilizer is ideal for gift items she embroiders in her retail shop. These include linens, hand towels, bags, purses, quilted tennis racquet covers and other items.

met the vast majority of his embroidery stabilizer needs, which meant he didn't have to inventory a wide range of stabilizers in his small shop.

"I often combine the Tearaway Washaway with a see-through nylon mesh stabilizer to give me the extra stability you would normally use a cut-away for," he says. "When I'm doing a design with high stitch counts or fine details like small lettering, I use a layer of mesh combined with one or two layers of Tearaway Washaway. The tearaway can be completely removed so you only have the mesh remaining, which does not show through the shirt. It's not similar to a heavy weight cut-

away where it's almost like an emblem underneath the shirt."

Sklar also loves the fact that it's biodegradable. "I'd rather be eco-conscious than not."

Fred Lebow is key accounts manager for Cotswold Industries, New York. He has been developing nonwovens and interlinings for the sewn products market for 31 years. He is a contributor to trade publications and presents seminars at Imprinted Sportswear Shows.

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Whyte House Monograms has a picky clientele, says Whyte. Customers do not want to see any trace of backing, and Whyte says she is able to remove all remnants by dabbing biodegradable tearaway with a damp rag. *Photo courtesy of Whyte House Monograms.*

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