

A PIECE OF PLASTIC MADE OUT OF... WOOD

BY HANS SANDBERG

Like many good ideas, the green alternative to plastic key cards came out of happenstance, a lucky break and lots of hard work to develop the product. “The wooden card is both unique and far more environmentally friendly than PVC, biodegradable PVC, corn-based cards or even recycled plastic or paper cards,” says Peo Åkesson, CEO of Sustainable Cards.

“Our card is carbon-negative: it binds carbon dioxide rather than emitting it into the atmosphere,” says Åkesson, who is also vice-chairman of SACC Colorado. The card is formed with three thin layers of planed wood, then is laminated and provided with a magnetic strip. The first time Åkesson used a wooden key entry card was during a 2005 visit to Sweden. He stayed at Scandic Kramer Hotel in Malmö, Sweden, and the hotel had used such cards for five years.

It was Bengt Liljemark, also known as Bengt Slöjdare (Bengt the Carpenter), who in 1994 started to make key cards out of wood at his workshop in the northern Swedish town of Hede. One of his hunting buddies worked at the large Swedish telecom company Telia, which at the time was looking for a new type of telephone card to give out during the World Athletics

Championship, to be held in Gothenburg in 1995. Encouraged by such a major client, they founded EcoCard Sweden and produced 100,000 cards, but a rumor began to circulate that the glue used to make the card was bad for the environment. This made Telia pull out and caused the company to go bankrupt. Bengt Liljemark bought out the technology from the dead company and brought it into his own company, Bengt Slöjdare AB. This was in 1996-97, and it was then that the large hotel chain Scandic called to request wooden keys for its hotels as part of raising its green profile. From then until 2005, nothing much changed. But in 2005, Liljemark retired and sold his business to Johan Mårtensson, who had a wood shop in Bollnäs, another city in northern Sweden, and Peo Åkesson took his trip to visit his parents in Sweden.



Peo Åkesson sees a huge potential for his green “credit card”.

Åkesson fell in love with the card and called Mårtensson to ask about the wooden keys, hoping to be able to market them in the U.S. He bought 2,000 cards at about 25 cents each. Before long he had partnered with Mårtensson and added a third member to the team, Greg Hartman, a top manager at an American hotel-consulting firm. Back in Denver, Colorado, Åkesson approached Vail Resorts, which found the wooden card

“very interesting,” but only wanted to pay seven cents per card, rather than the 28 he was asking. The cost had to come down, and Åkesson “became obsessed with this issue,” he tells Currents.

But making a key or “plastic” card out of wood is harder than one would think. Wood expands, contracts and absorbs moisture, thereby changing its shape and making it problematic for magnetic card readers. “It took three years before we figured out how to do it right,” Åkesson says.

He sees a huge market potential for the card and estimates the world market at 10 billion cards. But his Finnish supplier was only making raw material to support production of 700,000 cards. “Are you crazy?” people said when I asked how to get from 700,000 to a 100 million.” Next thing he knew, the Finnish manufacturer

closed down the production line. "I searched the world for a company that could manufacture the raw material I needed, in Scandinavia, India, America, everywhere, and eventually I found a way to manufacture sustainable cards using veneer from birch trees with an environmentally friendly overlay made from long fibrous cellulose and glue without harmful additives, all at a cost that was comparable to plastic cards." This production process is now subject to patent pending protection.

Last year, having solved the technical and cost issues, Sustainable Cards (as the company is now called) won the ultimate PR jackpot in conjunction with the Democratic National Convention. The "green" key card became the standard for 110 hotels serving the DNC. The company became world-famous overnight, and soon Peo Åkesson found himself talking to Wal-Mart and First Data, a big credit card company.

Sustainable Cards is based in Denver, but gets its wood from Scandinavian forests and has developed an automatic production process that will allow production of cards at costs competitive with the plastic alternatives. Åkesson says that he wants to locate manufacturing in Hede to be able to use Swedish wood and Swedish know-how while contributing new jobs to an area where they are badly needed. "We have received tremendous support from Norrlandsfonden, the government investment company Almi, and the county government of Jämtland," he says. The company's next major PR coup is the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December, where 100,000 of its cards will be used at many hotels, thanks to a partnership with the Danish ad agency GreenAd.

Maybe wood is the new plastic? Only time will tell!