

Bubble Wrap Now 'Over The Hill,' Still Fun As Ever

David Porter, Associated Press Writer

SADDLE BROOK, N.J. (AP) — People have walked to the altar dressed in it, protected their garden plants with it, even put it on display at highbrow art museums.

Mostly, they like the sound it makes when they destroy it, piece by piece, which largely explains the appeal of Bubble Wrap, the stress reducer disguised as package cushioning that maintains an inexplicable hold on pop culture.

The product once envisioned as a new type of wallpaper turns 50 this month, and enthusiasts' obsession with it has spawned more than 250 Facebook pages devoted to Bubble Wrap.

Ken Aurichio, communications director for Sealed Air, the Elmwood Park-based company that manufactures Bubble Wrap, thought he'd witnessed every form of Bubble Wrap mania until he received a wedding invitation last year from a woman in Ohio who said she would wear the product on her trip down the aisle.

"I'd never, never met her before," Aurichio said. "She must have gotten my name off the Web site." (No, he didn't attend.)

Like many innovations, Bubble Wrap initially was conceived for an entirely different purpose. According to Aurichio, a New York City designer approached inventors Marc Chavannes and Al Fielding in the late 1950s with a proposal for creating textured wallpaper.

That idea stalled, but the product the two men had created in a small lab in New Jersey found its niche when, according to company lore, Fielding was flying into Newark Airport and noticed the fluffy clouds that seemed to cushion the plane's descent.

Fifty years later, Sealed Air has global revenues of more than \$4 billion and legions of fans who have come up with myriad uses for Bubble Wrap (It's a wig! It's a mobile home! It's a sleeping bag! It's a flotation device!).

"It seems like every day there's something new," said Rohn Shellenberger, the company's business manager for air cellular products.

Sealed Air's 100,000-square-foot warehouse, just off Interstate 80 about 15 miles west of Manhattan, is an obsessive-compulsive's dream, with row upon row of stacked rolls of Bubble Wrap as big as seven feet in diameter.

The temperature is sweat-inducing, caused by the machines that process millions of granules of resin (one box is labeled "Munchy Resin") into clear plastic sheets at temperatures up to 560 degrees.

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Shellenberger pops one myth about Bubble Wrap; namely, that air is injected into all those tiny bubbles. Instead, it is trapped between the sheets after they pass over several rollers, one of which creates the indentations for the bubbles.

Two apparently disparate forces conspired to shape Bubble Wrap's growth: The advent of the transistor — and later the personal computer with all its accessories — which made the shipping of delicate electronic components a multibillion-dollar industry; and the Internet, which provided a forum for fanatics to swap stories and cement Bubble Wrap as a cultural icon.

Katherine Howard, a Massachusetts artist, tied Bubble Wrap bows to the chairs for her wedding last May and had guests participate in a popping contest. Not surprising for a woman who put up a virtual Bubble Wrap site in 1996 and is known as the Web's unofficial "Bubble Wrap Lady."

"We tried to find the most useless thing we could put on the Internet, and Bubble Wrap is a completely tactile experience," Howard said with a chuckle. "But it's something that everybody enjoys."

It's difficult to imagine Chavannes and Fielding, both now deceased, having any inkling that their invention would inspire such silliness or find its way into movies (Wall-E, Ace Ventura: Pet Detective), television (Monk) and high culture (Museum of Modern Art exhibit, 2009).

Then there's the true badge of hipness (for now, at least): A bubble-popping application for Apple's iPhone.

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