

24. PolyVision



Sustainability pioneers in Ceramicsteel



The Genk company PolyVision nv is active in manufacturing writable surfaces such as for school boards or whiteboards. These writing surfaces that are dry or wet wipable are all mounted on a steel base with an enamel-
led coating. Enamelling the steel that ultimately will be the writing surface is what PolyVision does. In a sustainable way which makes PolyVision the first European manufacturer with a Cradle to Cradle certified product i.e. e3 environmental ceramic steel.

There is a great drive to go even further in finding C2C-solutions or products.

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“PolyVision nv is part of a quoted American group”, begins Theo Vanheusden, site manager of the Genk division. “Our mother company has started in 1912 and always has enforced respectful entrepreneurship and good neighbourhood. PolyVision has grown from those foundations into what it still is today: a strong player with 30 staff in total and 3 production sites in Europe.”

That PolyVision is the worldwide market leader as a supplier of a high quality writing surface means that the product segment of the writing boards offers a lot of potential in itself. “An important nuance is that PolyVision Genk purely and solely produces the enamelled steel that is used as surface for the end product”, emphasises Theo Vanheusden. “Mainly other companies provide the pretty framing of our product.

To find where the unique selling point of the Genk division lays we need to go back to 1971 when this Belgian site - based on the American Alliance Wall process - started with an enamel coil coat line. “Enamelling actually is baking a ceramic wear and scratch resistant top layer on a base, steel namely. Today, we have managed to refine that process in such a way that we speak of high tech coil coating, screenprinted or not. Screenprinting ensures that we bake shapes and/or colour layers

simultaneously”, he explains, referring to applications we all know such as a school board with rules, or a work roster.

Due to the fact that the Research and Development Center for ceramic steel surfaces is located in the Genk division of the PoyVision group, the production process could be considerably optimised and numerous innovations achieved. Innovation requires knowledge and research and if we want to continue being leaders in this sector, we must be able to visualise the writing surfaces of the future.” An example is the ěno interactive white-board in which a microscopic matrix is integrated in dots which enables infrared pen interaction on and with the board via a bluetooth connection. “It is combined with a projector while the infrared pen is connected with your computer, which gives you a virtual pen you can write on the board with while the same board still can be used in the familiar way with real markers.”

How PolyVision managed to transform coil coating - in itself not a new technique - into an environmentally friendly production, 2005 is indicated a turning point year. “We then have brought e3 environmental ceramic steel on the market whereby the oxydes of heavy metals that usually are used are avoided. The re-composition of enamel in function of the end result still was a long process because the product could not lose its characteristics. The ink must be wipable and the surface must remain scratch and wear resistant”, explains Theo Vanheusden. The accurate research on all elements required in the production process has led to a Cradle to Cradle certificate, as the first producer in Europe.

It is nothing new that sustainability innovations coincide with a commercial driving force. Reducing your impact on the environment is linked to the reduction of expenses and Theo Vanheusden knows that too, and he does not refer to the 3Ps of profit, people and planet by accident. “We have carried out an internal survey of our personnel to find out whether they share that vision of sustainability,



or that it is important to them or not and the answer was crystal clear. There is a great drive to go even further in finding C2C-solutions or products. Our whole company management can already be proud of ISO9001 and ISO14001 certificates to the standards in safety management but you can only progress if your organisation is willing.”

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Besides writing surfaces there is still a lot of potential in the manufacture of these ceramicsteel coils as walls . Another market, with other demands, but perfectly complementary in the production chain. “The key again can be found in the unique production characteristics: fire safety, easy to clean, scratch resistant and therefore vandalism resistant. That’s why our panels often - and more and more often - are used to cover tunnels such as in underground corridors and train stations. Because we also have expertise in screenprinting, such panels are increasingly decorated with a print or pattern.” An underground corridor with a pretty flower or a beautiful art print, everything is possible. For the Antwerp Central Station for example PolyVision has screen printed panels with a marble pattern. Perfectly fitting for the grandeur of the building and a sustainable and therefore eco-friendly solution.

With e3 environmental ceramic steel and its lifelong warranty PolyVision has created a new standard in the world of enamel steel for visual communication and the company wants to continue playing that role. “With ēno a new fully C2C interactive whiteboard was introduced on the market in 2009 which should also initiate an educational innovation. Our baseline is not Bring learning to life for nothing. We want to achieve that schools can introduce interactive writing surfaces in the classroom without



Sustainable Success Stories

spending too much – with the same features and lifelong warranty as the standard whiteboard. That too is part of our vision of sustainability. If children can write their future on a C2C writing surface perhaps they will also subscribe to the whole Cradle to Cradle philosophy.”

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Christophe De Schauvre for REcentre

Interviewee / Theo Vanheusden, Site manager Genk

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www.polyvision.com

Sector • Metalwork

Year of foundation • 1971

Number of employees • 115

Turnover (2009) •
22,3 million EUR

