

# Enabling Innovation

## Sam Pickard – Laser Etching onto Cork

### CASE STUDY

### Overview

Sam Pickard, as a graduate from Bath Spa University, received innovation award funding to develop and test laser-engraved cork wall panelling as a commercially viable product.

### About the Project

Cork is a remarkable material. Practically impervious to moisture, it is also a poor conductor of electricity, sound and heat, is resistant to most chemical substances and has very good durability. It is a sustainable product and the European cork forests are extremely beneficial to the earth's eco-structure.

Cork has historically proved that it can be a fashionable interior product. Giving cork a positive new image could enable it to undergo a revival, which would benefit the cork industry, which is suffering from the decline in usage from the wine-bottling industry.

Cork substrate is normally used for floor underlay, noticeboards, wall and floor tiles. Engraving it for decorative and functional panelling is an innovative approach, as currently there is nothing similar on the market. The initial product concepts were for laser-engraved cork panels for use in commercial and domestic interiors and laser-engraved and printed decorative products onto cork.

The innovation funding was used to test cork panelling for:

- Industry standard compliance for fire retardancy (BS476: Part 7 1997) and sound absorption (BS354 Part E Building Regulations Certification)
- Sampling and experimenting with finishes such as the addition of printed foils and pigments onto the surface, and colouring the cork prior to engraving
- Development of commercial products using different weights and qualities of cork to create functional as well as decorative products such as tiles, table-runners and placemats
- Production of a sample pack and specification sheet as a marketing tool to approach architects/manufacturers for market research and customer feedback to inform the way the concept is sold into the market.



Sam Pickard

### Fast Facts

- Laser-engraved cork wall panelling tested and approved for commercial use
- Mentoring support helped to develop the concept in line with rapidly changing market needs
- Major cork manufacturer offers advantageous pricing and volume for orders, which increases commercial viability of the concept in economic downturn

## Benefits

Unique in its design, the laser-etched cork panelling is functional as well as decorative. It has the edge over other laser-engraved products, as it is environmentally sustainable – an important factor with architects and designers, who are increasingly making sustainability an element of their product selection.

Two industry mentors were established to support Sam as her project developed. One has experience at senior executive level in product marketing in the creative/design sector, and one is an expert on business process and building systems into a business that allow it to grow while keeping a firm grasp on suppliers, customers and cash flow. The mentoring advice enabled Sam to effectively develop her website, produce a sample range and appropriate packaging, think through a pricing strategy and market the cork effectively.

## Outcomes

The cork was tested acoustically at a laboratory at Southampton University and achieved a rating. It also achieved a possible fire status of BS476 class, which means that it can be used in commercial applications where this is required.

The innovation funding enabled Sam to develop bespoke specification sheets and envelopes for her sample cork tiles. Along with a promotional card, this gave Sam material to give out at trade fairs.

Sam was able to have a stand at the prestigious 100% Design exhibition in September 2009. 100% Design is a trade fair aimed specifically at architects, interior designers, interior specifiers and press, who are looking for products for current and future projects. This led to Sam receiving a few requests for samples from architects, which may develop into commissions.

The British representative of a major Portuguese cork factory, attending 100% Design, was so impressed with what he saw at Sam's exhibition stand that the company will now sell cork at cost to Sam, which equals a 50% cost saving to her production processes. Furthermore, they will sell at this price regardless of quantity ordered, which enables Sam to undertake small runs of lines.

As the project developed, mentoring support also enabled Sam to adjust her business strategy and planning in response to the economic climate. For example, by managing domestic sales entirely through her website – instead of trying to sell to the retail sector – Sam was able to concentrate on accessing the trade/architectural markets. This in turn led to competitive pricing and increased likelihood of sales in a challenging economic environment.



A laser-etched cork panel by Sam Pickard

## Perspective

“The mentor meetings and support were invaluable for keeping me focused and seeing things from a different perspective. After so many setbacks with various suppliers throughout the project, it was rewarding to get to 100% Design with my cork products and receive so much interest.”

**Sam Pickard**  
Innovation Award Winner 2008