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Landmarks in household convenience

The contribution made by nonwoven fabrics to the ease of household cleaning in the 21st century – from dedicated dry or wet wipes for virtually every light task to sturdier cloths, mops and sweepers – cannot be overstated. Nonwoven fabrics offer many advantages as wipes, being durable, easy-to-use, cost effective and lightweight, and the wet wipes market is now worth an annual $15 billion at retail, having grown tremendously since the early 1990s.

By the year 2000, an estimated 85,000 tons of nonwoven fabrics were being converted into wipes, not just for household cleaning, but also for personal hygiene and baby care, as well as industrial applications. In 2016, the nonwovens industry is on course to manufacture 1,335,000 tons of fabric solely for use in such products. There are very few products indeed that have recorded growth of approaching 1,500% over the same time period.

Visitors and exhibitors will gather at INDEX™17, the world’s leading nonwovens exhibition, in Geneva from 4th-7th April 2017, to gain first-hand knowledge of the latest developments in nonwovens for cleaning and hygiene applications, with exhibitors showcasing the astonishing functional qualities of these versatile materials.

Manufacturing
The success of the hydroentanglement (or spunlacing) method of bonding nonwovens by high-pressure water jets has grown in parallel with the wipes market. Its key advantages include the absence of chemical binders in processing and the ability to achieve the required strength and softness in the resulting fabrics, as well as a textile-like feel.

Leading nonwoven manufacturers such as Suominen produce highly-engineered products specifically for the wipes market. The company’s Airlace material, for example, is a composite structure in which a layer of air-formed wood pulp is entangled in a carded fibre web. Embossing and printing techniques have been developed along the way to enable brands to fully differentiate their products on the retail market.

The latest developments in the technology for spunlaced materials have involved perfecting systems for making products that are strong enough to go through the converting and packaging processes, perform their job perfectly, and then completely disperse once flushed down the toilet.

History
Pre-dating single-use and short-life wipes by some decades, however, are the well-known and more durable Vileda cloths. These were introduced to the European market in 1948, following their maker Freudenberg’s attempts to develop an alternative material to leather and coming up, instead, with a nonwoven that proved ideal for household cleaning.
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Going back further to the early 1900s, the Brillo pad – for many years a household cleaning staple for pots and pans and consisting of a ball of entangled wire wool loaded with soap powder – may conceivably be considered as a precursor to many of the sophisticated impregnated wipes on the market today.

The introduction of the first wet wipes is meanwhile attributed to Arthur Julius, who worked in the cosmetics industry and developed and trademarked the name Wet-Nap, for products that were first sold to Colonel Sanders for his Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises in the US in the early 1960s. The key nonwoven technologies of 3M, all developed over half a century ago, still form the basis of products worth an annual $4 billion to the company in sales, including wipes, scrubbers and abrasives, while, Procter & Gamble’s ingenious alternative to the traditional mop and bucket, the Swiffer – now including WetJet, Duster and Vac, Dust and Shine variants – very quickly became one of the corporation’s leading brands, with sales of over $500 million a year.

The Swiffer’s simple combination of a versatile, lightweight sweeper and advanced nonwoven cleaning cloths was an instant hit with consumers for its effectiveness in picking up dust, dirt and hair on all types of hard floor surfaces and is now available in a range of variations.

Swiffer’s nonwoven wet cloths provide a deeper clean than a mop as a result of nonwovens impregnated with sophisticated dirt-dissolving cleansers, while Swiffer dry cloths have a dirt-grabbing microfibre texture that picks up 50% more dirt, dust, and hair than a broom. The Swiffer’s sweeper has a 360-degree swivel head to get deeper into nooks and crannies and can also be used on virtually any surface, including furnished wood, vinyl, ceramic tiles, laminates and marble.

Such products may seldom be given a second thought when taken or put back in the cupboard under the stairs by busy consumers, but the spotlight will be turned on them – and the innovations that continue to arise in this market – at INDEX™17, the world’s leading nonwovens exhibition which takes place in Geneva from 4th-7th April 2017.

Click here to book your own stand space at INDEX™17, and visitor registration will be available online here from early 2017. For hotel bookings and additional information, please visit our website www.index17.org.

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