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New Market Opportunities for Copper and Copper Alloy Hardware

International Online Product Catalogue Launch

In response to rising interest in and demand for hygienic copper touch surfaces, Copper Development Association has developed an international online product catalogue of uncoated antimicrobial copper and copper alloy products, and is inviting manufacturers and suppliers to submit their products for inclusion. The catalogue currently includes architectural ironmongery, sanitary fittings, ward furniture and medical equipment.

Angela Vessey, CDA Director, explains the benefits of exploiting the natural antimicrobial properties of copper: "Touch surfaces such as door handles, taps and hand rails can act as reservoirs of infectious germs in hospitals, public buildings, schools and offices. Now, more than ever, we are all conscious of what we touch and what germs we might be picking up on our hands. Copper has been proven as a broad spectrum antimicrobial in laboratory and clinical studies, rapidly killing bacteria such as MRSA and E. coli and inactivating viruses including Influenza A (H1N1). Because copper is such an effective antimicrobial at room temperature and humidity, hardware made from copper and copper alloys, such as brass and bronze, can provide an additional hygienic measure and help to prevent the spread of these germs. The online catalogue has been developed to help those who need to source products and includes items that have been installed in clinical trials in the UK, US and Germany."

Included in the catalogue is the new range of copper door handles produced by AS Hardware Ltd, a Nottingham-based manufacturer of architectural ironmongery. Bryony Samuel, CDA's Marketing Manager, spoke to AS Hardware's UK Sales Executive, James Pritchard, about the new product range and the market opportunities for hygienic copper and copper alloy touch surfaces.

1. Tell us about your company?

AS Hardware Ltd is based in Nottingham and has been in business since 1990. We employ about 15 people and turn over around £4 million a year. We sell ironmongery – door handles, vision panels in doors and letter plates – primarily into the UK and Ireland construction industry, though we are starting to get more involved in the European construction industry.

AS Hardware is a UK manufacturer, and we manufacture everything in-house. We do not buy or import products from elsewhere. This ensures we can control the service and quality that we offer our customers.

2. Tell us about your new antimicrobial product range?

We put together a range of four handles that we feel are the best-selling handles we do at the moment, which allows us to retrofit. By making handles to specific sizes, we can take old handles off doors and put new ones on relatively cost-effectively.

In the past, we have been asked by various customers to look at whether we could do something with a coating for healthcare environments, and we've always been looking for something, but we hadn't found anything suitable. When we saw CDA's trials at Selly Oak Hospital, we thought: 'copper'. We looked at the information available on the material and we saw that copper has antimicrobial properties, and then we thought about producing a range of handles in copper.

After various tests, we put together four handles, and now we're hoping to get them into the marketplace to show people the benefits of using copper as opposed to a coated finish.

3. Why didn't you go down the coating route?

We do a powder-coated finish on a handle for different-coloured handles, and we've seen how easily that wears away, just with normal day-to-day use. People have rings on, they have keys in their hand, they're scratching them, they get moisture in there, and eventually you can see it wearing away.

That's a coating that you can see. What would happen if we had a coating that's invisible? How would we know it's still there? Would we know if it's working properly? Would we know if it's been coated properly in the first place? It's invisible, so we weren't very confident about putting that product forward. We weren't confident in saying, "this has been coated with an antibacterial product; put it in the marketplace and it will work". So, we stayed away from the coating. A lot of our competitors are going down the coating route, but we don't think it's a viable option. With copper, it's there, it's in the metal, it cannot fail; it's always working.

4. What does this new opportunity mean to your company?

Obviously the main motivation is commercial. We hope to make some money out of this and go out and raise our profile in the industry. We're also very passionate about this project.

Infection control is a big issue in the UK. People go into hospitals and get contaminated with an infection they didn't have when they went in; something like 9%, which is a big issue. Something as simple as a copper door handle could help massively reduce that. I think that's important.

5. What kind of interest is there to date?

We've had some good interest in copper as a metal for handles in other sectors, not necessarily healthcare, because they like the appearance of the metal. We have produced quite a few copper handles as a result of the marketing we've done. We've

had an enquiry about doing a seven-bed ward, which we're looking at hopefully getting further information on towards the end of the month.

It is very early days, but we're very confident that we can – with CDA's awareness building as well as our marketing – hopefully generate some interest.

6. Which copper alloy are you using and why?

We use the alloy CW024A (C106), which comes from our supplier. We chose it because it's easy to machine, bend and work from cold. We've tried various other copper alloys and that was the best one to use, plus it's very high in copper – 99.85% – which again is important for healthcare reasons.

7. How did you approach the product design?

We thought long and hard about what handles to use, whether we would do every handle that we offer in copper, or limit it to a range. We thought the best handles to use were something we could make in very different sizes to keep the cost down so people were not having to replace whole doors. We can take both handles off and put new ones on, so we came up with designs for four handles that are very popular sellers already, and which we can make in different sizes and diameters to suit that retrofit element, which we think could be important.

8. How do copper alloys compare to manufacturing with other materials?

The grade of copper that we're using is easy to machine. We can now produce the handles that we want to produce. We have quite a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility down there, it's all CNC equipment – computer operated – so it's not a massive problem for us, and I think once we get used to working more with copper, it will become easier.

9. Once volumes reach critical mass, how will the prices for copper products compare to products made from other materials?

We don't see any reason why it should be more expensive than the stainless steel and brasses that we buy at the moment.

10. How do you think the market is going to respond in general to the availability of hygienic copper alloy products?

It's a product that works 24/7. It's not going to fail. Unlike an applied finish, it's always working. I think, once we can get this into one hospital, it will snowball, and I believe the marketplace will react to it very positively.

Interview ends

Companies interested in having their hygienic uncoated copper and copper alloy touch surface products listed in the online product catalogue are invited to visit www.copperinfo.co.uk/antimicrobial/products/ and complete the submission form.

Those interested in antimicrobial copper who would like to be kept up to date with the latest news and developments can sign up to receive the quarterly Antimicrobial Interest Group ezine by sending an email to helpline@copperdev.co.uk.

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AS Hardware copper door handle

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