

FINAT hosts successful European Label Forum 2023

This year's ELF in Vienna welcomed 280 delegates and 33 exhibitors. On behalf of FINAT, James Quirk reports.

The FINAT European Label Forum 2023 welcomed 280 delegates from 24 countries to the elegant Austrian capital of Vienna on May 31 to June 2. The self-adhesive label industry association's 64th annual conference was the best-attended since its first iteration as the European Label Forum in Amsterdam in 2015.

As well as conference sessions from a wide variety of experts from the label industry and beyond, the event featured the FINAT Label Competition, dinner and a Viennese string quartet at the opulent Ferstel Palace, a celebration of Jules Lejeune's 25th anniversary as FINAT managing director, table-top stands from leading industry suppliers and ample networking opportunities.

No fewer than 33 leading international suppliers took table-top stands to inform the delegates about their offerings.

Wednesday May 31

Moderated by FINAT's Master of Ceremonies **Vlad Sljapic**, FINAT announced the winners of the **43rd FINAT Label Competition 2023** on the first evening of the European Label Forum, following welcome drinks and the opening of the table-top exhibition.



This year the organising committee removed the Digital Group award, due to the high percentage of entries which include a digital component. It was decided that digital should now be considered as a "conventional" process along with labels produced on hybrid presses.

The expert technical judging panel included chairman Tony White, Murat Sipahioğlu and Steve Wood, aided by Steven de Cleen from Proud Design Agency who provided a marketing perspective on the entries.

The number of entries this year was slightly down compared to 2022 (222) with 212 entries from 47 companies and 23 countries worldwide. Austria comfortably led the number of countries represented with 44 entries, followed by Turkey with 20. The highest number of entries by category was again led by Wines (49) and Alcoholic Drinks (32), with Cosmetics and Sets of Labels drawing for third place (16). The number of entries using digital printing technology as their main process remained fairly static at 108.

The winner of the Marketing/End-Uses Group was Çiftsan Label & Packaging Company from Turkey for Mustafakaya Miracle Rose Water. Çiftsan also won the Printing Processes Group for Shaik Platinum Love Chloé Body Mist.

The winner of the Non-Adhesive Applications Group was Kimoha Entrepreneurs FZCO of the United Arab Emirates for Bird's Color Sleeve. The Innovation & Electronic Printing Group was won by Schreiner Group GmbH & Co. KG from Germany for Film-Based Cover with Pressure Compensation Seal. A special Judge's Award was also given to Lebone Paarl Labels from South Africa for Neil Ellis West Coast. [Click here](#) for a full round-up of the winners.

Thursday June 1

The conference, moderated by independent marketing strategist and FINAT's "moderator-in-residence" **Bert van Loon**, was opened by the association's president **Philippe Voet**. He outlined the context in which the ELF was taking place, with the headlines dominated by war in Ukraine, rising inflation, and rapidly developing AI. Citing an IBM study, he said the biggest challenge for the next two-to-three years identified by business CEOs was sustainability, followed by regulation, cyber security, new technologies and continued supply chain disruption. "Big changes are coming. People are understandably anxious," he said.



Riding the global waves of uncertainty



The first session of the conference was dedicated to the socio-economic, geopolitical and packaging landscape. Few people could have been better qualified to give the morning's keynote presentation – "Riding the global waves: how geopolitical tensions and financial and economic shocks affect our business future" – than **Ron Keller**, a former Dutch Ambassador to Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and China. With further experience as Director at the Eastern European Bank (EBRD) and a top advisor to the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Dutch Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs, Keller was the perfect choice to

dissect the current economic and geopolitical climate, and his excellent presentation duly delivered. "We can only understand the present, and look at what is coming in the future, if we understand what has come before," he said.

He recounted how at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, most countries were moving towards the market economy and democracy. "Economic integration was a fantastic tool to prevent wars and increase cooperation," he said. "But where did it go wrong over the past 30 years?"

As someone with experience of regular face-to-face meetings with Vladimir Putin, Keller gave a clear-eyed account of the events that led to war in Ukraine. He remembered a conversation with the Russian leader in his offices overlooking Red Square, which houses a statue of Stalin. Putin explained the reason why to this day Russians place flowers at the statue's feet. "He said that Stalin's rule was the only time that Russia was listened to and taken seriously by the West," recalled Keller. "Putin is acting out of a desire for respect."

He summed up the status quo of key regions around the world. China is facing economic stagnation. Global goodwill towards the USA is declining. India will rival China, but is hamstrung by its highly segmented society. The Middle East is beginning to diversify economically and might open up politically in the future. The European Union has "no strategic foreign policy thinking at all. It is reactive rather than proactive".

He painted a bleak picture of the world economy, and emphasised the importance of global cooperation. "Too much liquidity was always going to result in inflation. The latest IMF report was very negative: growth is slowing."

Roll labelstock demand telling a story



FINAT managing director **Jules Lejeune** presented his annual overview of European labelstock market statistics, which tell "the story of the economy" and showed a precipitous fall in consumption of roll labelstock from the third quarter of 2022. Self-adhesive labelstock consumption in Europe reached 8.1 billion square meters in 2022 – a figure which has more than doubled since 2000 and is 50 percent higher than 2010. But the 2022 figure represents a 4.7 percent decrease compared to 2021 – the first drop since 2010.

Filmic roll labelstocks continue their solid growth with 28.2 percent share of labelstock demand in 2022, up from 19.5 percent in the mid 2000s. The share of PP rolls has more than doubled since 2005, due to increasing demand for high-quality product decoration in the health and beauty care, spirits and food sectors. Direct thermal, too, continues to grow its market share, thanks to growth in e-commerce and the increasing use of variable information on labels.

There remains strong variation in labelstock consumption per capita across Europe: the continental average is 9.2 sqm (down from 9.5 sqm in 2021), with Netherlands, Ireland and the Scandinavian countries above 15 sqm and the likes of Turkey, Russia, Romania and Ukraine below 5 sqm. To conclude his presentation, Jules summed up five key drivers determining the future perspectives for the label and packaging industry, and the distinctive features of the label sector compared to its 'neighbours' in the folding carton and flexible packaging domain.

The wider labels and packaging perspective

A panel session moderated by Bert van Loon then brought together **Andreas Koppitz**, CEO Pharma & Healthcare at Mayr-Melnhof Group, **Juan Luís Martínez Arteaga**, CEO of adapa Group (formerly known as Schur Flexibles), and **Isidore Leiser**, CEO of Stratus Group – companies printing cartons, flexible packaging and labels respectively – to give a wider perspective on the packaging sector in Europe.

Sustainability was cited as a key challenge facing all the companies, but also an opportunity. "Younger people in particular are driving the demand for sustainability," said Leiser. "We must evolve and adapt and provide new solutions to our customers. There are opportunities in this. But the sustainable product is more expensive, and customers must be open to that."



“Consumer awareness around sustainability has risen, but regulations are a moving target,” said Martínez Arteaga. “The current economic situation has had an impact. It’s an opportunity but also a threat.”

Koppitz pointed out that carton has an “excellent recyclability profile” and presented an upbeat view of the pharmaceutical sector in particular: “In the pharma sector there has been a decade of high growth. Societies are ageing and new treatments are entering the market.” He described new technology as “a gamechanger”. “The label is the centrepiece of innovation.”

Leiser also cited human resources as a key challenge for the next five years. “It’s a big concern. We need more young people to join the workforce.”

Session two – on new technology – saw AWA president and CEO **Corey Reardon** present on “Investing in times of disruption”, before he and Labels & Labeling magazine’s strategic director **Andy Thomas-Emans** moderated a panel featuring **Jens Brusgaard**, CFO of Optimum Group, **Jakob Landberg**, Nilpeter’s director of sales and marketing, and **Nick Mockett**, a partner at Moorgate Capital.



In his presentation, Reardon summarised key findings from the latest FINAT Radar report, which was conducted by AWA, and from a special survey commissioned by FINAT to assess the general investment climate and the future impact of automation, industry consolidation and digitalisation (*FINAT members can access the survey results [here](#).*)

“Market demand is still relatively good,” he said. “Consumers are still buying products that need labels. But what we are seeing is production going down – due to stock levels. Why is self-adhesive more affected? Because it has a more complex value chain. We expect slight improvement through this year and supply/demand levels to even out by Q1 2024. Given high inflation and harder access to credit, “the investment environment is not as bad as it seems”, said Reardon.

During the panel, Jens Brusgaard of Optimum Group said that investment required “a lot of reflection time at the moment”. Nilpeter’s Jakob Landberg described the current investment climate as a “slow period, which started before Covid and was then exaggerated. People spend longer thinking about investments before pulling the trigger.” The economic outlook is “uncertain”, said Nick Mockett of Moorgate Capital. “Inflation rates mean investors need to make a higher return. But packaging is a robust industry which will always attract investment.”

Landberg reported increasing interest from converters in hybrid technology, and pointed out that conventional technology has been so digitalised that it has become much more efficient. Brusgaard was bullish about flexo’s future: “The demise of flexo has long been predicted. But if you have the right operators, then future has a long future.”

Materials matter



Session three, on sustainability, kicked off with a thought-provoking talk from architect and entrepreneur **Thomas Rau**, who is ranked in the top five Dutch influencers in sustainability. RAU Architects has been designing “environmentally conscious” buildings and healthy indoor climates since 1992. His new venture, Turntoo, focuses on closing material loops and developing business models to put the circular economy into practice via a unique identity for raw materials and a materials register (the “Madaster”).

“Sustainability is about optimisation,” he declared. “Circularity transforms the system. The real challenge is not climate change, but changing our mindset. Everything is temporary – our lives, our needs, the materials we use – but the consequences are permanent. We must take responsibility.”

He emphasised the importance of circularity, describing it as “a new relationship between human beings and Planet Earth”. He recalled a client who wanted to create a new building. Rau convinced him that the existing edifice was a source of valuable materials, and the new building ended up using 80 percent of the previous structure.

Game changers in packaging sustainability



Thomas Reiner, CEO of the Berndt & Partner Group and one of Europe’s most renowned packaging experts, discussed “game-changing trends in packaging sustainability”. He focused on the topic of sustainability as a “huge opportunity”, as well as its links to agility, supply chain management and digital transformation. “The two major disruptors are sustainability and digital transformation. Digital and sustainability go hand in hand.”

Packaging represents 7-8 percent of the environmental impact of a product on average, yet consumers believe that it counts for more than 50 percent, he said. “This shows that people judge products on their packaging.” He cited the example of supermarket chain Lidl, which successfully used sustainable packaging as a way of building its brand.

Reiner emphasised that packaging being carbon-neutral was more important to consumers compared to its recyclability or its recycled waste content.

Design for recycling



Fabrizio Di Gregorio, technical director at Plastics Recyclers Europe (PRE), spoke about the importance of designing labels and packaging with recycling in mind. PRE launched RecyClass as a non-profit, cross-industry initiative that advances plastic packaging recyclability while promoting the trace ability of plastic waste and recycled plastic content in Europe. Di Gregorio discussed the RecyClass Design for Recycling Guidelines and their implication for the design of filmic labels and packaging.

“Removability is key,” he said. “The label should be designed not to interfere with or hinder the recyclability. Designing a label to be compatible with recycling involves the facestock, ink and adhesive.”

To improve recyclability, RecyClass advises opting for filmic labels over paper labels, polyolefin-based labels for both HDPE, PP and PET plastic packaging, small-sized over large labels or full body sleeves, a low thickness label, transparent clear or white labels, and avoiding multiple labels on one package.

According to Di Gregorio, testing conducted by PRE shows that the key parameter for the removability of the label is friction rather than temperature.

Brand-owner views on sustainability

Thomas Reiner returned to the stage as part of a brand-owner panel featuring **Gian De Belder**, technical director, R&D Packaging Sustainability at Procter & Gamble; **Kris Renwick**, sustainability packaging strategy manager at Reckitt; **Katharina Stankiewicz**, senior package development engineer, Skincare EMEA / Sustainability (R&D) at KAO Germany; and **Erich Schlenz**, R&D laundry and home care at Henkel. Answering questions from moderator Bert van Loon, the panel discussed the latest developments in consumer trends surrounding sustainability, joint industry initiatives such as HolyGrail 2.0, and their implications for brand-owner demands on the development, design and procurement of labels and packaging.



The panel were united in their emphasis of the importance of environmental sustainability in the labels and packaging used for their products, highlighting the reduction of packaging materials as well as their reuse and recyclability as key areas of focus. "Reduction of packaging material is our number one priority," said Reckitt's Kris Renwick. P&G's Gian De Belder pointed out the importance of effective waste sorting: "No matter what we do as brand owners, if the sorting is not right then it doesn't matter." Thomas Reiner stressed the need to be "consumer-centric": "Product performance is not negotiable. Performance needs to be matched by sustainability."

"Collaboration is key," said Henkel's Erich Schlenz, a sentiment with which the panellists unanimously agreed. "We want to think about the whole value chain, and collaborate across all of it," said KAO Germany's Katharina Stankiewicz.

The day closed with a panel session dedicated to linerless labeling, moderated by independent consultant and FINAT stalwart **Noel Mitchell**. The extensive line-up of experts included **Maxime Bayzelon**, president of ETI Converting; **Mark Caines**, president of Iconex Europe; **Wayne Middleton**, senior linerless segment leader EMENA at Avery Dennison; **Miquel Prieto**, global product manager Films & DTL at Fedrigoni Self Adhesives; **Vincent Tinnacher**, senior country manager at UPM Raflatac; **Sergio Veneziani**, linerless business unit manager at Beontag; and **Harald Wallner**, international sales director at Herma.



The wide-ranging discussion took in the capital costs involved in moving into linerless label production, the sustainability factors driving increased demand, and increasing opportunities for the technology in the logistics and retail sectors.

Attendees gathered at the lavish Ferstel Palace for dinner and were serenaded by a Viennese string quartet. The grandiose building, originally intended to be for the national bank or stock exchange, was named after its architect following renovation in 1982. During dinner, Vlad Sljapic, Philippe Voet and Jakob Landberg paid tribute to FINAT managing director Jules Lejeune for his 25th anniversary running the association.



Friday June 2

Emotional sub conscience



The conference's second day began with a highly interactive presentation from **Tobias Bartel**, a trainer and consultant in innovation and technology management. He urged delegates to "bring emotional subconscious to your business" and spoke of the importance of using creativity to solve challenges.

He demonstrated impressive techniques to increase memory capacity and performed a series of remarkable feats of recall. Showing how easy it is to trick the brain, he made a coin disappear from his hands and materialise under the watchstrap

of this baffled writer, who was sitting far too close to the stage for his own good.

Mastering the supply chain triangle



Session four, comprising the final presentations of the conference, focused on supply chain management – a topic thrown into the spotlight in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Using live polls to gauge audience opinion, **Bram Desmet**, lecturer at Vlerick Management School in Belgium and founder of Solventure, took the audience on a journey from the customer's customer to the supplier's supplier. "We are at a crossroads – how do we prepare for continued volatility and disruption?" He spoke of the importance of the supply chain triangle – service, cost and cash. "Balancing this triangle is the key

challenge," he said.

The first part of the session focused on the identification of key supply chain challenges in the label value chain. After a break for coffee and networking in the exhibition area, delegates returned and divided into teams to work towards possible solutions to the challenges identified. [Click here](#) for Bram's post-event blog reflecting on the outcomes of the session.

Digital transformation



The ELF's final presentation saw **Lindsay Herbert**, the author of "Digital Transformation", outlined five actionable stages of change that can enable a digital transformation in a business. Herbert's core message was that real digital transformation is about learning to become more adaptive to change itself: "Success comes from the ability to react to the small and early signs of change, leveraging data, technology and new ways of working along the way."

She used the acronym BUILD – Bridge, Uncover, Iterate, Leverage, Disseminate – to illustrate the five stages required: building relationships, identifying barriers, taking action, celebrating small successes, and communicating, scaling and training.

“You have to set a metric. Measure what you treasure,” she said. “Not the end product, but the end result – the value you create for your customer. Instead of thinking about digital transformation as a way of saving costs or reducing headcount, think about what additional services and value you can offer your customers.”



FINAT president Philippe Voet wrapped up the conference and thanked attendees for their presence.

“The ELF 2023 tackled the key themes dominating the management agenda in our industry today: sustainability and circularity, digitalisation, supply chain issues, human resources, and market changes,” said FINAT managing director Jules Lejeune. “We are delighted at the positive feedback received about the programme and the event as a whole, and we look

forward to getting together again at the European Label Forum next year, 22-24 May in Athens.”