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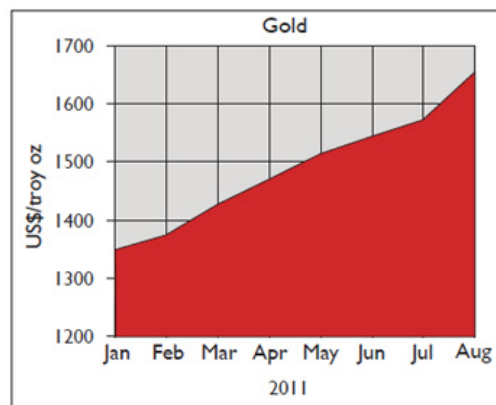
Escalating Metal Prices Spur Design Ingenuity

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When gold broke through \$1770 (£1080/1235€) per troy ounce last week – the highest price in history for this precious metal – it made news around the world.

But gold isn't the only metal that's glittering these days. Prices of silver, palladium, titanium and other metals have also reached new highs in the past year, prompting astute scientific researchers and design engineers to take a new look at how they select and use these materials.

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Goodfellow (www.goodfellow.com), a well-known supplier of high-purity metals and materials to science and industry, has noticed the change. The company has always offered two distinct services: rapid shipment of small quantities of in-stock items from among the thousands of products listed in their online catalogue, and a "made-to-order" service for customers who need custom fabrication or further processing of standard items. As raw material prices have risen, there has been a marked increase in orders for materials made to customers' specifications.

"In the past year or two, there has been a dramatic shift toward more custom enquiries and orders," says Stephen Aldersley, managing director of Goodfellow Cambridge Ltd. "People are looking for ways to limit the amount and therefore the cost of the metals they buy - for example, specifying a rod or wire with a smaller diameter or different purity. They're stepping away from a 'this is what we've always ordered' mentality and looking to find the critical dimension or composition that will allow their product or process to work in the most economical way possible."

Save now, save later

Nowhere is this goal more important than in the development of prototypes. The more sophisticated the product or process being developed, the more likely it is that every detail of every material and component will become part of the specifications approved by an agency overseeing the product's safety and efficacy. Any economies derived from careful selection of component raw materials during development will be multiplied many times over when full-scale production begins.

"Customers have definitely been approaching us more often with requests for cost-saving variations on our standard range of precious metals and other materials," says Goodfellow technical specialist Alan Scott. "With our business set up to supply small quantities anyway, we can usually meet their needs without requiring them to buy large quantities of 'test' items." Goodfellow reports that such requests are also coming from companies with established products or processes who have the opportunity to retool for better cost efficiencies.

If necessity is the mother of invention, ever-rising metal prices will continue to foster fresh waves of ingenuity among researchers and product designers. Aldersley, Scott and others at Goodfellow welcome the challenge this situation presents. Says Aldersley, "Almost all of us at Goodfellow have a scientific background, so we enjoy the problem-solving necessary to make sure researchers or engineers get what they want. We understand where they're coming from and we're happy to help them get to where they want to be."