

Integrate recycled resin into virgin

During the past three to five years, a lot of talk, promotional activities and other programs have been undertaken by the plastics industry and resin manufacturers concerning recycling plastics. However, if you ask a few consumers about their impression of whether the industry has been doing its job recycling, I'm afraid that the answer is not going to be pleasing to the industry.

As a critic of the industry from within, I do not believe that the lack of progress is due to the lack of a genuine commitment, or the lack of desire to do better. Instead, several elements have caused the industry to be ineffective in what it has done so far.

Recycling is a brand-new field, and certain segments of a mature industry lack an entrepreneurial spirit, because it is too risky to try something innovative that might not work.

Traditional bureaucracy also gets in the way. Companies stick to what has been tried and proven. They try to learn as much as they can first, taking their time and using all kinds of experts. The industry fights any detrimental legislation at all

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costs.

All of these factors combine to create the impression that industry is not serious about recycling.

The key, I believe, to making recycling work is to integrate recovered resin into the virgin stream. That step will require:

- The development of more efficient recovery processes.

- That recovered resin must meet reasonably high quality standards.

- Industry to be convinced that it is in its best interest to be actively and seriously involved.

- National laws regarding the use of virgin and recycled plastics in various applications.

- A reasonable timeline for industry to comply with those rules.

- The virgin resin industry has to begin to control capacity expansion to take into account recycled resin production.

Integrating recycling capacity into the virgin stream can save money and help to decrease the industry downturns that result from cyclical oversupply. Recycling plants can be brought on-line much faster and with smaller capacities than virgin resin plants. I estimate that, in high density polyethylene, assuming that post-consumer material takes 25 percent of the market by 1998, the industry could save about \$1.5 billion in capital investment on new virgin resin plants.



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Until this kind of thinking begins to prevail, recycling will continue to be a half-hearted activity based on a defensive strategy.

Despite all of plastics' superior qualities, if the public doesn't believe it is being recycled, the material will begin to lose support, and both virgin and post-consumer plastics will suffer.

The acceleration in the rate of plastic substitution for other materials will depend on the public's perception of our industry's success in recycling. Some surveys have shown that the industry's image is currently very low.

Time is certainly running out on the industry, and the tragedy is that the leadership is not really taking things very seriously. From my vantage point, it seems to be satisfied with the little that has been done.

The latest communication from the Partnership for Plastic Progress relative to its preference for "waste-to-energy" recycling offers proof that industry is still missing the point.

Industry is very quick and generous in challenging any government or public initiative that does not serve it, yet it seems very reluctant to move except at a snail's pace when it comes to recycling.

This has generated much ill will, and the time will come when there is no more credibility, and it will be extremely costly for all of us.

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