

Internet ... cure or blessing for plastics?

by David A. Chasis

The speed and volume of digital informational communication is astounding. In the past five years we adopted Wikipedia instead of encyclopedias, Google instead of libraries, MapQuest instead of maps, spell checkers instead of dictionaries, iPods instead of record players, online shopping instead of malls, e-mail instead of letters and texting instead of talking. As Bob Dylan sang, "The Times, They Are A-Changin'."

Today more data is available at the touch of one's computer keyboard than ever existed in all the combined world libraries. OK, so we have access to more information than we can possibly use. Does this make us wise? Does this allow us to make better and more informed decisions? Yes and no. Yes, if can verify the authenticity and accuracy of that information. No, if we're working from faulty data.

The plastics industry, now more than a century old, was founded on and advances through science. Organic chemists and researchers work diligently and methodically in exploring and uncovering the secrets of hydrocarbons. The creation of new, useful plastic compounds is based on fact-finding and experimentation. Yet throughout the past several decades, the industry has been subject to critics decrying that advancement, based on unverified research and inaccurate conclusions. Today, the primary tool used to spread misinformation is the same one used to gather so much valid information — the Internet.

In the past several years, Internet attacks on the plastics industry have ranged from random and easily discounted statements to more concentrated disinformation campaigns from well-funded, coordinated groups. Such ludicrous statements have included claims that vinyl shower curtains give off dangerous gasses, that plastic water bottles can cause cancer, and heavy metals can be leached out of PVC pipe.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has investigated and dismissed the majority of these types of claims. Globally, many scientific communities have tested and approved the use of most of these plastic products as safe and effective. Extensive documented research — not only by the chemical and plastics industries but independently performed by third parties — shows the error of many of these anti-plastic statements. Yet the spread of misinformation continues, aided by new technologies.

Faced with a nebulous cloud of dubious charges, how can the industry best respond? We need clarity, certainty and specificity — and we must be at least as adept in making use of technologies and social networking as are those spreading bad information. Here are four strategies that can return sense and credibility to the picture — no matter whether one views that picture on a PC or iPhone.

Make our motives and history clear

How many consumers realize the long history of safety and careful investigation of issues the plastics industry supports? The industry has a historical reputation for researching and reporting on any and all claims of personal and environmental harm possibly attributable to plastics. Past experiences have shown that if research proves any of the claims to be, or even having a hint of being, true, the plastics industry will aggressively terminate or amend processes and/or materials to protect the health and well-being of the public. The industry has never demonstrated an attitude of apathy or of "putting its head in the sand"

when confronted by potential health issues. The plastics industry's actions and motives regarding health concerns needs to be explained, documented and promoted to the public to combat negativity.

Aggressively promote the benefits of what we produce

Another strategy is to share with the public the many features and benefits plastics bring to their lives, and how plastics save energy and resources. Our industry has a great message; what is needed is an investment in getting these messages into the public's eyes and ears.

Counter charges with specific facts and data

We can all play a role in quelling myths and inaccuracies by directing the public to established web sites that scientifically and directly address anti-plastic propaganda. Best of all, most of these are easily accessed online. Industry group web sites such as the American Chemistry Council's plasticsmythbuster.org and the American Council on Science and Health's asch.org/factsandfears are already having a significant effect on changing the conversation. And popular independently secular sites that address Internet and e-mail rumormongering such as snopes.com and breakthechain.org are already looked to by many to get the facts straight.

Just as industry support groups are doing, we can as individuals address inaccuracies as we encounter them in our work and lives. This doesn't mean getting into "wars" where accusations are traded for days with random Internet commenters which usually results in a waste of time and effort. In fact, some people deliberately post provocative e-mails and comments in order to incite arguments — it's their idea of fun. An effective policy is to simply respond to an e-mail, comment or article with a reference to a scientific citation or a reputable web site that has the facts. Another tactic is to forward such remarks to industry associations such as the American Chemical Council (ACC), Vinyl Institute (VI), Plastic Pipe Institute (PPI), Plastic Pipe and Fittings Association (PPFA), International Association of Plastics Distribution (IAPD) or other comparable organizations. It would also be prudent to become actively involved with professional organizations to work on ways to solve this challenge.

Use the same tools as those of our adversaries

With professional associations and as individuals, we can become skilled at using new technologies and social media. Read and comment on blogs, subscribe to Twitter, start a web site that gathers the best scientific information. How about a YouTube video praising the environmental advantage of plastics or a Facebook page called "Plastic is Good for Me?" Be creative and get the message out to the public.

The plastics industry has a positive and compelling story to tell — whatever the media. What is needed now is for our industry to address the challenge and commit the resources to robustly take advantage of the digital information age, making the Internet a blessing, not a curse, for plastics. ■

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