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Resin distributors taking different paths to sustainability

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Energy battery plastic package

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Resin distribution firms are encountering a range of reactions in how their customers approach sustainable materials. In recent interviews, some distribution execs said their customers were pushing hard for access to biopolymers or materials with recycled content. Others said there was some interest but not a lot of sales activity just yet.

"The recycled side has always been good for us," said Michael Bernich, president of Jamplast Inc. in Ellisville, Mo. "More injection molders and extruders now have sustainability goals." "There's also been an increase in fresh ideas from their idea people," he added. "Sometimes the idea might have been on the shelf for five years."

"You have to ask where the stem of the push [for sustainability] is. You have to educate [customers] on what they need, whether it's recyclable or sustainable."

Jamplast founder John Moisson added that the firm has been offering bioplastics since 2002. "There's been an ebb and flow over that time," he said. "At times, people thought [bioplastics] were a niche product, but this past year the interest level has been crazy. "There are a lot of large brand owners looking to meet sustainability goals."

The distribution business of Avon Lake, Ohio-based PolyOne Corp. is focused on sustainability as a founding member of the Alliance to End Plastic Waste. The firm also ranks as one of North America's largest compounders and concentrate makers.

"Plastic is everywhere, in places that save lives and reduce energy usage, but it's also in places it shouldn't be, like our oceans and rivers," PolyOne Distribution President Scott Horn said in an email. "We certainly recognize that we need to be part of the solution to this problem."

PolyOne currently has more than 30 materials that have been designated as sustainable that are available to customers. Horn added that his firm's sustainable solutions portfolio "contains dozens of materials from multiple suppliers that can enable customers to reach their sustainability goals."

Recycled content polymers offered by PolyOne include PC/ABS, acrylics, polypropylene and other styrenics. The firm also features bio-based acrylics, cellulose and nylon grades based on castor oil.

"At a corporate level, PolyOne has been focused on sustainability for over a decade ... and we've been certified by the [American Chemistry Council] as a Responsible Care company," Horn said. "Our mission also involves enabling our customer's sustainability and innovation with world-class products and services."

Greg Boston has seen interest in sustainable grades of polyolefin compounds, nylons and styrenics at General Polymers Thermoplastic Materials in Auburn Hills, Mich. "And you don't just want to go to the lowest part of the marketplace with something like recycled ABS. You don't want to run [a material] and cross your fingers. It's risky to go with the cheapest," he said.

Customers of PolySource LLC in Independence, Mo., "have been asking about sustainability for a long time," President and CEO Grant John said. "There's a lot of focus on the image of plastics in general."

"We can help them find solutions sometimes using their own scrap. They can use their own resources and get that material back into their feedstream."

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At Nexeo Solutions Plastics LLC in The Woodlands, Texas, sustainability "is one way that we work with our customers," according to Executive Vice President Shawn Williams. "We can find ways for them to improve their cycle times with renewable or recycled content in materials like PLA [polylactic acid]."

"Sometimes these are for new applications and sometimes they're replacing an existing material. I think in the future we'll see more additions to these [sustainable] materials."

Vinmar Polymers America of Houston has seen "customers all around the world asking about sustainable products," according to Vishal Goradia, senior vice president with parent firm Vinmar International Ltd. "The approach we take varies on product types."

Vinmar Polymers President Kirt Dmytruk added that his firm has "a full portfolio of recycled materials that can deliver value to customers and suppliers."

Sustainable products and "green" resins have been part of the product mix at Marco Polo International LLC for several years, according to CEO Marco Liuzzo. The Melville, N.Y.-based firm currently is seeing an increase in interest for those materials from suppliers and customers, he added.

Marco Polo is in the process of signing distribution agreements for 2020 with international suppliers to offer more sustainable products to its North American customers, Liuzzo said. The firm also is in discussions to partner with its North American suppliers to distribute post-consumer and post-industrial grades with recycled content. Those materials then can be pre-blended or blended at customer locations, he added.

"There's been more interest, but not any real impact," said Mike Pignataro, North American sales vice president with Bamberger Polymers in Jericho, N.Y.

Pignataro added he recently met with a processor who made beverage packaging. That customer was approaching sustainability by looking into ways to reclaim and re-use beverage crates and cases, as compared to trying out new materials.

"Sustainability is a top topic with suppliers. It hadn't been on the agenda before, but it's only translated into inquiries at this point," Ed Holland, president and CEO of M. Holland Co. in Northbrook, Ill., said.

He added that his firm looks at customers "case by case" if they're looking into bioplastics or recycled content materials. The pricing differential also plays a role, since some bioplastics can cost more than \$1 per pound, making them more expensive than standard resins.

Chase Plastic Services Inc. of Clarkston, Mich., "hasn't seen much movement" on sustainable materials, except in the area of reprocessed products, according to President Kevin Chase.

Osterman & Co. of Cheshire, Conn., hasn't received a large number of requests for sustainable materials, Distribution Sales Vice President Dave Dever said, but the firm might look at carrying more such materials in the future.

"There's pressure on the industry, so sustainability might be a major concern in the long-term," he added.

PolyOne currently has more than 30 materials that have been designated as sustainable that are available to customers.

