

Focusing on the True Enemy

"I'm convinced that our wonderful industry has an environmental value proposition that trumps anything the metals folks can put on the table." — Kevin Short, IAPD President

by Mark Shriver

At the recent convention in Chicago, IAPD's new President Kevin Short issued challenges to each of the committees, focusing us on the true enemy. Not each other, but those who are attempting to damage our industry and create a negative perception of plastics in the eyes of the public and those who create policy. From the Environmental Committee, where the challenge may be the greatest, he has asked that we "compare and contrast our industry to theirs," and has asked all of us to "advocate locally" on behalf of plastics in our communities.

Energized by the challenge, the Environmental Committee will invest heavily on this matter in the upcoming year. Today we are launching a series of articles focused on comparing our products to our competitors, emphasizing the benefits, the versatility, the sustainability and the wonders of a material that shapes our modern world.

In this edition, we will look at the uneducated, negative public environmental perception versus the practical, well informed, reality of plastic. We will also get you thinking about how to productively respond to those who condemn plastics without merit.

We've all heard the negatives about plastics and the naysayers have a lot of information on their side. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch has been well publicized as has the concerns with phthalates and biphenyls, high energy consumption and the fact that plastics don't degrade in landfills.

What we aren't hearing is the other — the informed — side. Let's start with the misconception that plastics consume more energy than traditional materials. A comprehensive study by Franklin Associates, Ltd., a life cycle and solid waste consulting firm determined that the total energy used in manufacturing plastics packaging is considerably less than the energy used to produce nonplastic alternatives. This means that without plastic, the equivalent of an additional 58 million barrels of oil or 325 billion cubic feet of natural gas would have been required to meet America's packaging needs alone in 1990. That's enough to meet the energy needs of 100,000 homes for 35 years. For further information, visit <http://plastics.americanchemistry.com/plastics-an-energy-efficient-choice>.

This study takes into consideration the raw materials such as oil in manufacturing products along with the energy consumed in their manufacture and shipments. Although it focused solely on packaging, its findings can easily be translated to other industries in the battle between plastics as compared to more traditional substrates. Look at the transportation industries, for example. Airplanes, ships and automobiles without plastics would be a great deal heavier and consume much more fuel than the plastics used in them today. Your cell phone would be far heavier and you could forget about carrying your laptop with you.

Take a look at power transmission, clothing, durable goods, medical devices, building materials and almost all products. These products are affordable, available, transportable and accessible because plastics have made them so. From the advent of the first use of plastics in replacing ivory billiard balls, plastics has worked to give us products previously only regionally available or too expensive for all but the wealthy. Plastics' impressive ratio of cost to performance means that people of all incomes can enjoy its benefits. One could argue that plastics helped to create not only modern society, but the middle class, too.

Next, let's talk about plastic not being recyclable. The facts are that plastics are recyclable and in many cases more valuable as scrap than metal and other traditional materials. The problem is plastics are more difficult to separate and we are a society that wants everything effortless and easy. While our industry continues to improve its efficiency, increase its recycling and reduce its waste, the public and other industries are not following suit. It's easy to outlaw plastic bags and blame the plastics industry, but the fact is that supermarkets in the United States take back these bags and recycle them. When recycled, they are repurposed, usually with less energy than other materials and made useful again. Do you bring your bags back?

While IAPD members typically are not in the single-use market, the effort involved in recycling remains constant. It is not easy — recycling requires space and time. However, in talking to those who are recycling, they all agree that the benefits outweigh the costs. For example, IAPD members have been and continue to be extraordinarily committed to environmental responsibility. Based on survey data collected in 2013, the majority of our members recycle, 77 percent offer green products or services and our organization as a whole recycles 350 million pounds of plastic annually. We need to organizationally embrace, improve and promote these figures throughout IAPD and all our partner companies.

Another issue we must address is the growing public stigma that all plastics are causing environmental and health problems and are not a good replacement for wood, paper, glass or metal. IAPD members are extremely cognizant of this and it is our duty and responsibility to our industry to educate our customers, the public and policy makers. We must also continue to promote and encourage the proper use and handling of this wonderful material. While the argument can be as broad as the number of products made with plastics, a primary argument in this area is that the very attributes that some consider negative are the same characteristics that give plastics their supremacy.

There are certain things we can do to support our cause. First of all, recycle. Don't bury it. Every time you bury plastic you are wasting resources, period. Next, use the right material for the job. There is an incredible array of plastic materials. Choose wisely and, if you need help, an IAPD member can advise you. Then look at the big picture. Let's use water pipes or underground pipes for instance. The arguments from the metal industry cannot stand up to the facts that plastic alternatives are less expensive to produce and ship, easier to work with, are less affected by weather, do not corrode and last longer. Why are people still using metal in certain applications when plastic is the superior material?

Growing our market is contingent on continually educating the industry on the sustainability of plastics and teaching them to look beyond the consumption of oil as a raw material and at the overall environmental aspects. Our products cost less, take less energy to produce and have a lower carbon footprint "cradle to grave" when considering coal and the other chemicals used and their hazardous byproducts when complete.

Bottom line: Plastics are necessary in a modern society and, if used responsibly, can be one of the most sustainable materials available.

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