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Way2K: Industry interviews in the lead-up to the K 2022 trade fair

In the circular economy, we generate impulses for each other

Interview with Jan Hendrik Ostgathe, Managing Director of Kreyenborg GmbH & Co. KG

Mr. Ostgathe, how has the circular economy developed in recent years?

A great deal of things have been set in motion. As a family business, we have been associated with the plastics industry for decades. Until a few years ago, recycling only played a minor role for many companies, but that has now changed. Market players who used to pay less attention to recycling are jumping on the bandwagon. We are also seeing major extruder manufacturers who were previously less associated with recycling now starting to offer recycling equipment, indicating a clear trend towards recycling. At Kreyenborg, we register increased demand for our machines from the recycling industry. At the latest since the K 2019, which can be seen as the starting signal for the recycling economy, this demand has seen a linear increase.

Who are the drivers?

We all drive each other in the circular economy. In recent years, consumers have developed a completely different awareness in the face of climate change and the identified finite nature of resources. Major brand owners are responding to this, and many now want to go green themselves and take on a pioneering role. Machine manufacturers are also drivers, because they provide the machines that make recycling possible in the first place. The market is also a driver. If raw plastics become expensive to produce, this can provide an economic advantage for recycled materials. And, of course, legislative bodies are also providing an impetus by stipulating that a certain value stream must be recycled. It's all interlinked. A dynamic has now been created within which all participants are inspiring and encouraging one another. I think this is the right way to go.

What significance does information have in this process?

It is enormously important. Everyone must know what is right and what needs to be done. And this is where things are often still lacking. For example, an organic label advertises with outer packaging made of recycled paper. But on the inside, this paper is coated with plastic. Consumers who are not aware that this packaging is virtually impossible to recycle, or can only be recycled at great expense, will have the feeling that they've done something positive for the environment. But the opposite is the case.

At the beginning of the circular economy, recyclates were of poor quality, but initially it was all about getting started. Now the focus is on quality.

What contribution is Kreyenborg making in this regard?

To improve the quality of recyclates, we have developed two new methods for our reprocessing machines. The first one, IR-CLEAN, is an additional cleaning process that removes contaminants from PET. In the end, one hundred percent of the PET recyclates treated in this way can be used again for food packaging. Demand for this product has risen sharply in recent years. The second method, IR-FRESH, which is still very new, involves removing unpleasant odours from HDPE packaging, such as shampoo bottles. In both processes, we work very efficiently with infrared light as an energy source. Both are very good solutions for eliminating odours and contamination once the value streams have reached a stage where they can also be sorted.

Where do you still see barriers for the circular economy?

The availability of material streams is still insufficient, which is putting the brakes on the process just as much as the fact that the purity of material type is still largely lacking. This is difficult to achieve because there are a large number of different recyclates, plastic combinations in a product or contamination through printing inks. So-called multi-layer packaging is difficult to recycle because it combines different plastics with different properties. We should think about establishing separate deposit systems for different plastics, comparable to the one for PET bottles. As long as this does not exist and no sorting purity is achieved, recycling will be difficult.

Germany is more advanced in the circular economy than other countries. How can it be set up elsewhere?

We are already discussing technical solutions here on how we can represent value streams; no one else is that far advanced. In South America, for example, there is no deposit system for PET bottles. Here, people collect PET bottles in the streets and sell the material to the processors. There's almost more recycling here than in many other industrialised countries. And that's only because they make money from it. That's the key to the whole thing. You have to be able to make money with recycling. Virgin material is still too cheap in many parts of the world. Manufacturers and consumers are too careless with plastic because, in some cases, it just doesn't hurt cost-wise. We don't need a lot of regulation, what we need are tangible incentives for manufacturers and consumers to use single-variety and therefore recycling-friendly packaging solutions. In addition, however, there must be even more incentives to ensure that these packaging solutions can be realised with recycled plastics. There must be monetary control. Ultimately, it must become more expensive for all of us to simply throw away the recyclable material plastic. Resources are finite.

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Industry interviews on the road to the K:

The world is facing major challenges: Climate change must be fought; the environment must be protected, and resources must be conserved. It is also important to make good use of the opportunities offered by digitalisation. The plastics industry has a key role in this process because plastics are ubiquitous in the world.

Climate protection, digitalisation and the circular economy are therefore also the three major topics at K 2022, the world's leading trade fair for the plastics industry. To get in the mood for the industry meeting in autumn 2022, the VDMA is letting representatives of the plastics machinery industry and all other stakeholders in the sector have their say through weekly interviews.

VDMA Plastics and Rubber Machinery

More than 200 companies are members of the trade association, covering over 90 percent of the industry's production in Germany. Ten percent of our member companies come from Austria, Switzerland and France. German member companies represent a turnover of 7 billion euros in core machinery and 10 billion euros including peripheral technology. Every fourth plastics machine manufactured worldwide comes from Germany in terms of value; the export quota is 70 percent. Ulrich Reifenhäuser, managing partner of Reifenhäuser GmbH & Co KG, is the chairman of the trade association.