Finding a solution that can maintain the integrity of the PET recycling stream is vital to the sustainable practices for brand owners and converters, the goal of which is to reduce, reuse and recycle. According to the APR and the American Chemistry Council (ACC), the PET container-recycling rate increased for the sixth consecutive year, up 28 percent in the United States in 2009. However, despite the increase, there was still a 4 percent decrease by weight in the total number of PET bottles and jars available for recycling.

So, while the recycling rate represents an ongoing commitment to recycling, the need to recycle more is clear. The challenge for packaging decision makers is to leverage this commitment by designing PET packaging in a way that enhances recyclability, especially for closed-loop, bottle-to-bottle operations.

Brand owners are increasingly aware of the global significance of maintaining the integrity of the PET recycling stream. To address the issue, reclaimers encourage the use of plastic label materials with a specific gravity of less than 1.0, as well as attributes like perforations on full-wrap shrink labels that aid in their removal and improve the overall recycling process.

Another option for a long-term solution is using a label that floats when processed, is compatible with the existing label stream and PET recycling infrastructure, and is consistent with the Design for Recycling Guidelines established by the APR. The guidelines can be downloaded at http://www.plasticsrecycling.org/technical-resources.

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A Sustainable PET Recyclable Solution

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Advances by Avery Dennison have leveled the playing field for PET recyclability and shelf-impact. Traditionally there has been a trade-off between the two; however, the Bottle-to-bottle Film Portfolio is designed specifically for the PET (polyethylene terephthalate) recycling stream.

PET is a popular plastic package for food and non-food products because of its strength, thermo-stability and transparency. Bottle-to-bottle recycling reduces landfill, enables up-cycling into food-grade rPET and capitalizes on the renewable energy in a PET bottle. Brand owners, packaging designers, raw material suppliers, converters, retailers, consumers and waste management companies collectively impact sustainability. While the overall goal is to make it easier to recover more materials, brand owners look beyond package design. They recognize sustainability can offer a significant point of differentiation as retailers’ demands and consumer awareness about the environment and natural resources carry increasing influence towards the brands that are put on store shelves and in shopping bags.

“NAPCOR applauds Avery Dennison and its customers for addressing a critical impediment to the efficient recycling of PET containers,” said Mike Schieder, National Association for PET Container Resources (NAPCOR) Director of Technology. “The popularity of pressure-sensitive labels makes it imperative that they be successfully removed as part of the standard PET reclamation process to increase their recyclability. We hope other label manufacturers and brand owners follow Avery Dennison’s lead.”

No residual adhesive remains on the PET flake, which could contaminate, discolor or otherwise diminish the value of the rPET. The “switchable” functionality is unique to SR3010 and not found in Avery Dennison’s general-purpose emulsion adhesives. The formulation of SR3010 is more complex, requiring a switching mechanism and specialized components to turn the adhesive “on” and “off.”

APR-Approved Solution

The bottle-to-bottle recycling solution from Avery Dennison offers two pressure-sensitive label options—clear and white BOPP facestocks. Both film stocks have a density of less than 1.0 and have passed the Association of Postconsumer Plastic Recyclers (APR) recycling protocol for PET containers with plastic pressure-sensitive labels.

Along with the acrylic water-based adhesive, the clear and white facestock materials feature two Ultra-thin PET liners, 92-gauge and 75-gauge, further pushing the sustainability envelopes. These 100-percent recyclable clear and white BOPP facestocks deliver the same quality, clarity and performance of traditional pressure-sensitive. Compatible with flexo, gravure and offset printing techniques, brand owners have a simple, yet immediate, label replacement strategy that makes their PET product packaging recyclable and reusable safely.

Increasing PET Recycling

According to a market study by Smithers Pira, the global consumption of PET packaging will reach an estimated 18.1 million tons by 2017. PET consumption will continue to rise as brand owners look for creative ways to bring products to market. However, driving the need for sustainability is stronger legislative and resource protection programs. As such, the potential exists that a full reclamation infrastructure will not yet be established to effectively process these materials.

It is clear that reclamation facilities are vital to the industry. The need for more facilities is obvious, but those that are online today must be effective at sorting and processing. To make bottle-to-bottle recycling a workable venture, residual contamination of the PET recycling process due to label materials must be resolved.

These facilities purchase post-consumer bottles, sort and clean them to produce a viable flake for remanufacturing. The contaminated recycled PET can lead to color issues, loss of intrinsic viscosity, loss of clarity, extruder drift and black specs. Unfortunately, the end result is the contaminated materials are only suitable for down-cycling into lower-grade products. A greater reinvestment in technology is needed that makes it possible to up-cycle the regrist into something of greater value or use, thereby reducing waste and the need for virgin material.

Improving PET Quality

Contamination in the PET recycling process has been a long-standing issue for everyone involved in recyclable packaging. All plastic label options, from pressure-sensitive to shrink sleeve, impact PET packaging design and recycling. The APR recommends the use of plastic labels with a specific gravity of less than 1.0. These are preferred because they are easily removed in conventional water-based density separation systems. APR recommends avoiding label systems that sink in water since the substrate, inks, decoration, coatings and the top layer are contaminants in recycled PET flake.

Once separated, the PET bottles and their labels move onto grinding. Labels that stay on the granulation and elutriation process can be separated from PET flakes for further processing.

At drying temperatures from 165 degrees centigrade or lower, label materials tend to clump and stick in dryers, requiring costly and unscheduled maintenance. It is also critical that the labels be fully removed from the flake for subsequent processing. Finally, care must be taken to select caustic-resistant ink systems to avoid bleeding into the wash by being processed.

Promoting Sustainability, Creating Shelf Appeal and Capturing Share

Whether it’s a private label or a national brand, consumers will only spend about 2.5 seconds at the shelf deciding what product to buy. So what influences them the most? Increasingly, it’s brand spend about 2.5 seconds at the shelf deciding what product to buy. Whether it’s a private label or a national brand, consumers will only...