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The CEO Magazine
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Repurpose, Re-use, Recycle

Plastic Recyclers Europe is advocating for a cleaner world through better, more resource-efficient plastics waste management, public procurement, and the education of consumers.

Images courtesy of Plastic Recyclers Europe

Plastic. It's a material that is in so much of what we buy and use, from clothing to our cars or the packaging our food is encased in. Since the 1800s when industrial chemistry and the Industrial Revolution led to the mass production of plastics, it has been making its way into almost every aspect of our lives. And while there are many positives to using plastic over other materials, including being able to manufacture for specific purposes and the strength of plastic, it has been well known for years that unless the world changes the way it disposes of plastic then it is going to cause many problems in years to come. Plastic degrades in

the environment very slowly, meaning that it causes large amounts of waste, and plastic debris can also be harmful to wildlife that may ingest or become entangled in it.

The good news is that plastic can be recycled, and many countries and regions around the world are enacting laws and targets to try and increase the amount of plastic that is recycled and re-used. Plastic Recyclers Europe was created in 1996 to help with this task. It acts as an association for plastic recyclers across Europe, creating a network, supporting plastic recyclers, and advocating for the industry. Originally with only seven members, Plastic Recyclers

Europe now covers more than 80 per cent of the recycling industry and has more than 115 members.

Ton Emans is President of Plastic Recyclers Europe, and is an expert in the industry with more than two and a half decades experience. This, Ton explains, is why he is confident in his ability to lead the organisation. "I have been in the recycling business for more than 25 years. Since 2000, I have been the managing director of the recycling activity, which is one of the most important reasons that I am now the president of Plastic Recyclers Europe. So I know something about plastic recycling. I started my career with DSM more than 25 years ago. In 1990, I >

VENTUS Sp. z o.o.

The most advanced LLDPE film recycling line in Poland.

Ventus is the largest Polish, and one of the largest European, companies dealing with the recycling of agricultural plastic waste, in particular LLDPE. We operate virtually in the entire northern Europe region. The processing plant is situated in Ciechanów, Poland. Next years production of the regranulate should reach about 14,000 tonnes. Ventus fully supply large European corporations; our highest aspiration is to achieve the perfect quality.

“I care about the quality so much, perhaps because of my former contacts with the PET industry. My personal ambition is to achieve the levels of the recycle quality never before obtained by anyone in the industry. I really want to close the circulation by recycling the agro stretch film into the automatic stretch film. We have already succeeded, but we have to transfer our experiments to the industrial scale. Furthermore, I would like to popularise the recycling of waste film. There are already perfectly and completely automated technologies available; in a period of five to 10 years we will not waste this important resource. Generally, the higher the GDP per capita, the better or richer the morphology of waste. There are extremely large numbers of valuable fractions, only to mention such unwanted ones as high impact polystyrene or many types of polypropylene.

I am convinced that the next 10 years will be a period of dynamic development of the plastic waste recycling industry, and that the current treatment of plastic waste will seem as distant as the Neolithic period.”

Rafał Jankowski

*Executive Vice President
and co-owner of Ventus*

My experience with recycling began by chance in early 2000.

As a freshly appointed ownership supervision director at the Boryszew Group, closely cooperating with Roman Karkosik—its largest shareholder and one of the richest Poles, I was directed to work at the Brzeg Tannery, running at a loss at the time. Tanning at the company was practically over; I was responsible for launching the PET bottle recycling system in order to supply the raw material to the then largest plant of the Boryszew-Elana Holding, a producer of synthetic fibres. This was a huge challenge that I managed to complete thanks to the help of many people from the former tannery including Karina Wściubiak, its CEO at the time—a twenty-something, extremely beautiful and intelligent woman, which she still is today.



After starting the production within the scope and to the volume possible with the obsolete equipment at hand (i.e. in the bottle to fibre cycle) and the volume of 200 tonnes per month, I attempted to complete the investment to increase the capacity to 1,000 tonnes using the proven Italian Reg Mac line. However, the owner's plans for the company changed. Brzeg Tannery changed its name into Alchemia, and was used for the “back door listing” of the freshly privatised Batory Steelworks. This is how my collaboration with the Boryszew Holding ended. Because I held a significant stake in Alchemia, I became a millionaire in a relatively short time; however, it only slightly sweetened the fact that I was unable to reach the above-mentioned 1,000 tonnes of production capacity. I became fascinated by recycling. Is it not compelling that we can create something out of nothing?



Despite having a chance to return to the Warsaw Stock Exchange where I had previously worked as an industry analyst, I was successfully infected with recycling; I remain in this line of industry to this day. In Poland, I represented the second largest recycling company in Germany, TPP Thermoplastics GmbH; at the time, my family entrusted me with the management of the SPV under the name Ventus. This was to be a wind farm, but was dedicated to recycling. I have turned Ventus—established seven years before on three pages: the court registration certificate, the tax office certificate, and the statistical office certificate—into a business with a turnover of €10 million that employs 160 people. For a long time, I had a small capital. Only the EU subsidy in the amount of about €1 million significantly changed the situation of the company.



came to a subsidiary of this big chemical factory and started up as their turnaround project manager. That was how I came into the recycling industry.”

Ton says he owes a lot of his leadership style to his time in the industry, and is proud of how he is seen as a leader and industry expert. His style has changed over the years to what it is now, and Ton says he believes his visionary approach makes a real impact. “Today I am more a visionary; I believe in things and that we can make it happen. And at the beginning I was more a coach, trying to find people who would like to do it, and following them and asking them for their help.

“Your leadership grows depending on how you do in the business. Today, when I say something, people believe in it; people follow it. The simple reason is that they believe in what I see and how I think we need to develop. In the past, it was more that when I thought something was possible I needed to show that it would be possible and they needed to follow it. But now they follow it

simply for the reason they believe in what I say.”

Ton has clear goals for his time heading up the organisation. He says the key to increasing the amount of plastic that is recycled in Europe is education, and that is what he wants to focus on. He has a clear vision for what the industry needs to do and a plan to implement that. “In 2000, I took over as managing director of the recycling facility, and then my appointment to president of the plastic recycling was from 2011,” Ton says.

“Since 2011 when I became president, I’ve tried to convince people that we need to do more on plastic recycling. That is the biggest trend that I have made and the most visible to everybody else. I am a visionary; people believe in the vision we have for plastic recycling; we still believe that it can grow. And I think that is the most important thing I can do. You need to convince people that they can still do something to improve the sustainability of plastic in Europe.”

This, Ton explains, is one of the keys to change. It’s not just about

convincing companies to change and use recycled materials; it’s about convincing consumers that they can do something themselves. According to Ton, the general public are the ones that can make all the difference, if they know how. “Without consumer education, reducing waste would not be possible. The consumers are the guys or the people or the citizens who use the products, and they make the decision.

“Their decision is very important for the recycling industry. When we started up recycling, we talked first about sorting. Sorting by the source; they need to source it before we collect it. They need to make the decision about what they want to buy. If they believe in what we say and they believe it is right to do, they will support us. And we need to only convince them and give them the education and they will do the right thing. We have to try to inform the consumers about the products that we make and the products that are recyclable.”

Not only is education important for the consumers and what can be

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done with plastics after they have been used, but designing plastic products with the end of their life in mind needs to occur at the start of the process. This, again, comes down to education and awareness. “I think today not everybody focuses on the recyclability of products,” Ton says. “A lot of products are designed without the end of life in mind, so they are designed only so they are simple to use.

“And what we need to do, or what is important for us, is to inform the people that they need to be designed to be recyclable. And besides that, we need to inform the people what would be the content of recycled material that we could re-use. People think all the time that we simply collect it

and burn it, but it is not true. We can recycle it, but the important thing is that they need to look at what they need to sort for us and for themselves, and they need to look at what is an acceptable source, and why we do it.”

What many companies don’t realise, Ton says, is that recycling and then using recycled materials is actually better for a business’s bottom line. Recycling creates more jobs, drives down the cost of materials, and helps the environment. By recycling more, a company can increase productivity and reduce waste, giving a financial incentive to recycle.

“When you talk about efficiency you can talk very quickly about output, and then you look to your

manpower. So you need to do it more efficiently; you need to do more with fewer people or less consumption of everything else—products, energy, and all the rest of the facilities. This is your simple focus: focus on what you can achieve and how you can do it, and with what sources you can do it. For me, efficiency means you produce more with less resources.

“When we do recycling, we do a lot of energy saving, and CO2 reduction, greenhouse reduction. Each time that you recycle, you have a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. We can also create jobs, which applies to the plastic industry, too. If you recycle the source, you don’t need to use the virgin material; for example, you maybe don’t use oil. Today, oil is maybe not so important, but it is a resource.”

The issue of resources is especially pressing, given the worldwide shortage of a number of essential materials. In Europe, Ton explains, the problem is even bigger because of the large amount of imports the area has. By using recycled materials, the region could reduce the number of imports, having a positive impact on the environment and the economy. “It’s simple. If you recycle you have a lot of cost savings. If you can use recycled materials instead of virgin, there’s a cost advantage. Then you’re protecting against the exhaustion of resources and the increase of supply waste and the use of commodities.

“That is what has happened with virgin industries in the past few years in Europe. We’ve had a lot of cases where the manufacturers have no materials for production. There was a shortage on the market of plastic material. So that has a big impact on the plastic industry—that they can’t produce and not make money, not turnover. And if you were to recycle more, as was proposed in the circular economy, then you would say, ‘Okay, you will be less dependent on virgin materials, and you would have another resource other than





virgin, and you see the supply waste is gone.’

“I think that is so important for us in Europe. In Europe, we don’t have access to the oil, so what else can companies do? They have only the plastic waste. They can recycle the plastic waste, so they can limit the waste they have today. The other point is the price, if you look to that. Why has the price gone up for plastic, when the price of oil reduced by 45 per cent over the last 12 months? Because the price was so high in the last half-year because of a shortage of supply, and it actually shut down the plastic industry factories. Not the converters—the converters are looking for materials—the factories. The other impact that you saw is that when the US dollar is strong in Europe we’re struggling.”

Ton isn’t doing all this on his own, though. The European Commission has set in place targets for recycling, and is working with



countries, companies, and organisations like Plastic Recyclers to ensure they are met. It’s a huge job when you consider the statistics and amount of plastic produced every year, but change is coming. “There are simple recycling targets which will be put in place by the European Commission,” Ton explains.

“According to European legislation, the plastic packaging that is placed on the market needs to be recycled. At this moment, European institutions are thinking about increasing this target from 2020 and 2025. Today the target is 22.5 per cent of the packaging that is sold on the market, and that could go up to 45 per cent in 2020 and 60 per cent in 2025. At this moment, everybody is waiting on the direction from the European Commission. Of the 25 or 26 million tonnes that we collect today, still more than 10 million tonnes goes to landfill, 10 million tonnes goes to recovery, and only 6 million tonnes is collected for recycling.

“And more than half of this 6 million tonnes goes still in exports to the Far East. That is stupid; we export it and it’s a loss of resources for the European Union. We could use it here. The targets will go up; we have no doubt about it. The question is by how much and where we want to measure it. Are we going to measure it by what we have collected or are we going to measure it by what we recycle?”

This increase in the recycling targets is good news for the economy, the plastic manufacturers, the consumers, and for Plastic Recyclers Europe, Ton explains. As the targets increase, Plastic Recyclers’ members will see increases in their businesses too. “When we look to the future, the European Commission said that they want to be more ambitious and they want to put higher recycling targets in place. That tells me that our business can only grow. Everyone agrees that we need to grow, that recycling needs to grow and we need to reduce the waste. That is important. We create

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- Ton Emans



more than 60 million tonnes of plastic in Europe every year, and we collect today for recycling 25 million tonnes, and it will grow every year by one million tonnes.

“By doing more recycling we will reduce the amount of waste we produce, we will reduce pollution, and we will avoid using valuable resources that we use for different products, and we can of course produce big savings for the European industry. Recycled material is still cheaper than virgin material. And still there are new business opportunities. If you recycle more you could try to sell it on the market or to different markets, or you could replace different stuff. So I think there are still business opportunities. It’s about protection for Europe too. Europe is totally dependent on imports, and if you can do it yourself it would protect the European industry, because you could get a stable supply and stable prices.”

For the future, Ton says it is important to have every stakeholder committed to the same plan and same targets. This, he explains, in conjunction with education, is the only way a real difference will be made. Clear guidelines and responsibilities need to be set to ensure the job is done in the most effective way and the best outcome is achieved for not just Plastic Recyclers’ members, or for the European Union, but for the entire world. “It’s very important that we have a

very clear definition of a producer and the roles and responsibilities in this, like when we talk about the targets.

“When we talk about recycling targets, everybody knows that the targets have to go up, but everybody tries to defend their own position. Everybody knows the common position; the common position is that we need to do more. Not for us, but for the next generations. And if you ask me, ‘Ton, what do you think about the pollution, or more taxes?’ what I think is important is that we say that we would like, all together, to collect more, and recycle more, and design better. And I think that is so important. The most important issue here is are we willing to produce products in the future with the end of life in our minds? That’s the simple question.

“At this moment, for me it is important that we discuss it. We need to make everyone aware, and awareness will grow in Europe about what we do with our waste. It’s important that first we need to focus all together on prevention. Secondly, we need to focus on re-use, and then at the end of life there will be recycling. We still believe in these steps. So if somebody comes up and asks me, ‘What do you need to do first?’, we need to do prevention. And if you want to recycle everything, there is a saying: you need to make it out of gold. Then everyone will collect it and nothing will be lost.”




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