Sustainability Advantages of Ultraviolet and Electron Beam Curing

By Ronald Golden

Consumers and suppliers of consumer products are taking an increasingly active interest in environmental issues and "sustainable development." A number of RadTech members have been approached by their customers with requests to provide information on the contributions that their products can make to the sustainability initiative. In some cases, sustainability may be considered as a criterion in purchasing decisions.

Sustainability Advantages of Ultraviolet and Electron Beam Curing

Ultraviolet (UV) and electron beam (EB) curing offer several significant "sustainability" features compared to conventional thermal curing processes:

- Reduced use of solvents, lower VOC and HAPS.
- Reduced energy usage.
- Reduced fossil fuel usage.
- Lower greenhouse gas emissions.
- Reduced or eliminated "end-of-pipe" pollution controls.
- Reduced transportation requirements.
- UV and EB inks, coatings and adhesives do not dry out by evaporation…
  - — That makes it easier to recover and recycle printing and coating materials.
  - — That means they require less solvent to clean up.
- UV and EB printed/coated packaging materials are recyclable and repulpable.
- UV/EB curing materials have very low vapor pressures (reduced worker exposure).

These features have been confirmed by studies that consistently demonstrated that UV and EB curing enable reduced energy usage and greenhouse gas emissions, primarily because of their very high applied solids, and because UV or EB energy is used instead of heat for curing. Thermal curing must heat large volumes of air and/or generate radiant infrared energy to:

- Maintain the thermal curing oven at temperature;
- Evaporate and remove water and/or solvent;

TABLE 1

Pressure-sensitive adhesive application parameters

		Technology		
	Units	UV-Cured acResin	Solvent	WB Dispersion
Coating Weight	g/m²	20	20	20
Coating Solids	%	99	47	55
Line Speed	m/min	200	167	100
Web Width	m/min	0.8	0.8	0.8
Production Rate	m²/hr	9,600	8,016	4,800
Annual Production Time	hr/yr	8,000	8,000	8,000
Annual Production	m²/yr	76,800,000	64,128,000	38,400,000

TABLE 2

Electrical energy consumption for web coating pressure-sensitive adhesive

Technology				
	Units	UV-Cured acResin	Solvent	W/B Dispersion
Electricity Consumption				
Adhesive Preparation	kWh/m^2	0.008	0.008	
Coating Application	kWh/m^2	0.009	0.011	
Curing	kWh/m^2	0.028	0.013	
Finishing	kWh/m^2	0.006	0.001	
Solvent Incineration	kWh/m^2	0	0.01	
Electricity Subtotal	kWh/m^2	0.051	0.04	0.14
Annual Electricity Consumption	kWh	3,916,800	2,757,504	5,376,000
Average Cost of Electricity to Industrial Users[5]	$/kWh	0.062	0.062	0.062
Annual Electricity Cost		242,842	170,965	333,312
Normalized Electricity Cost	$/million m^2	3,162	2,666	8,680

- Stay below the lower explosive limit when solvents are present;
- Heat the substrate to the curing temperature; and
- Cure the ink and/or coating.

Moreover, any volatile organic solvent emissions from thermal curing ovens require "end-of-pipe" controls (incineration or solvent capture). Both processes require additional energy input and generate corresponding greenhouse gases.

In contrast, with UV or EB curing processes, reactive monomers replace all or most of the diluting medium and become part of the cured polymer so little if any added volatile solvent or water is needed in the formulation, and effective applied solids can approach 100 percent. Curing is initiated by UV or EB radiation and is almost instantaneous, the substrate remains cool, and air circulation is mainly for equipment and substrate cooling, and evacuation of any volatiles.

Previous analyses comparing UV/EB processes to competitive solvent and waterborne technologies have also shown substantial reductions in pollution and hazardous waste associated with spent solvent-borne materials and cleanup, as well as significant improvements in product performance and productivity, often at an overall lower net cost.[1]

RadTech Sustainability Task Force

RadTech International North America has formed a Sustainability Task Force—comprising a group of raw material suppliers; ink, coatings and adhesives formulators; equipment manufacturers; end-use converters; and packaging manufacturers—to study and quantify these sustainability characteristics. Specifically, the RadTech Sustainability Task Force has established the following goals:

- Develop comprehensive life cycle analyses for all applicable technology options.
- Develop quantitative comparisons of energy, emissions and resource use of UV/EB processes versus conventional thermal curing alternatives.
- Develop a model to help decision-makers to quantify sustainability factors when evaluating technology options.

Pressure-Sensitive Adhesive Case Study

The most complete published quantitative analysis comparing ultraviolet and waterborne technologies was a 1997 study of the conversion to UV curing from thermal curing of waterborne inks and coatings for exterior aluminum can decoration and coating at Coors Brewing Company.[2] A previous *RadTech Report* article[3] reported how the conversion resulted in a reduction of up to 80 percent in total energy usage in Btu, including electrical power and natural gas. Greenhouse gas emissions showed a corresponding reduction of up to 67 percent. Moreover, these benefits were achieved at a lower net cost for the finished product.

The RadTech Sustainability Task Force was seeking a more recent study to develop a similar comparison using current energy and emissions factors. BASF Corporation generously provided RadTech with the raw data from their ecoefficiency evaluation of waterborne, solvent and UV web-applied pressure sensitive adhesives[4] as the

TABLE 3

Natural gas consumption for web coating pressure-sensitive adhesive

	Technology			
	Units	UV-Cured acResin	Solvent	W/B Dispersion
Natural Gas Subtotal	1000 ft3/m^2	0	0.0033	0.003
Curing	1000 ft^3/yr	0	147,494	115,200
Solvent Incineration	1000 ft^3/yr	0	64,128	0
Annual Natural Gas Demand	1000 ft^3	0	211,622	115,200
Normalized Natural Gas Consumption	1000 ft^3/ million m^2	0	3,300	3,000
Natural Gas Price to Industrial Users[6]	$/1000 ft^3	N/A	8.00	8.00
Annual Natural Gas Cost		0	1,693,000	922,000

basis for the following quantitative analysis. Table 1 shows the application parameters. Tables 2, 3 and 4 show a comparison of the energy demand components for each coating technology.

The higher solids of the UV coating also means reduced energy required to transport the coating from the formulator to the application site. Table 4 shows the transportation energy required to deliver enough of each type of coating to cover 76,800,000 square meters at an applied coat weight of 20 g/m^2.

Table 5 shows a comparison of the total energy requirements of each of the three technologies, normalized to Btu/square meter of coated surface. Conversion of electrical energy MWh to Btu is based on an average heat rate of 9.713 million Btu/MWh; conversion of natural gas usage to Btu is based on 1,031 Btu per cubic foot.

On a normalized basis (Btu per square meter of coated substrate) the UV-cured resin requires up to 89 percent less energy, compared to solvent and waterborne systems.

TABLE 4

Transportation energy requirements on an equal coverage basis

	Technology			
	Units	UV-Cured acResin	Solvent	W/B Dispersion
Normalized Annual Coating				
Solids	MT	1,538	1,538	1,538
Liquid Annual Coating				
Volume	MT	1,553	3,272	2,796
Net Truckload	MT	20	20	20
Truckloads/Year		76	160	137
Diesel Fuel Usage*	gal/yr	6,781	14,365	12,275
Energy Consumption**	Million Btu/yr	943	1,997	1,706

*Based on an average 500-mile delivery trip and fuel mileage of 5.7 mpg[7]

**Based on 139,000 Btu per gallon of diesel fuel[8]

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Both generation of electrical energy and combustion of natural gas generate corresponding greenhouse gas emissions (Table 6).

Factors for conversion of electrical MWh and combustion of various fuels to greenhouse gas emissions are based on data published by the U.S. Energy Information Administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).[9] On a normalized basis (MT CO2 per million square meters of coated substrate), the UV-cured resin generates up to 87 percent less carbon dioxide, compared to thermal curing solvent and waterborne systems.

UV-Cured Products Are Recyclable

Trials at Beloit Corporation confirmed that UV/EB inks and coatings repulp easily.[10] Mill scale trials show that UV/EB-coated waste can be incorporated into standard furnish with no detrimental effects on product quality. The study concluded that UV- and EB-printed and coated

TABLE 5

Overall energy requirements on an equal coverage basis

		Technology		
	Units	UV-Cured acResin	Solvent	W/B Dispersion
Electricity Consumption	MWh/yr	3,917	2,758	5,376
Natural Gas-Curing	kft^3/yr	0	147,494	115,200
Natural Gas-VOC Incineration	kft^3/yr	0	64,128	
Transportation	Million Btu/yr	943	1,997	1,706
Total Energy Demand	Million Btu/yr	38,986	246,963	172,695
Normalized Total Annual Energy Demand	Btu/m^2/yr	508	3,851	4,497

paper can be recycled into tissue and/or fine paper grades using commercially available equipment.

Moreover, the high gloss and abrasion resistance of UV- and EB-cured coatings in some cases, can enable replacement of laminated structures with printed inks and coatings. Laminated paper and plastics are difficult to recycle due to problems with separating two incompatible types of materials. UV/EB printed inks and coatings break down under recycling process conditions, permitting effective recycling of both paper and plastic structures that formerly were intractable in laminated form.

Summary

In summary, UV and EB curing have numerous "sustainability" characteristics:

- Substantial reductions in energy demand.
- Substantial reductions in fossil fuel usage.
- Substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.
- Reduced transportation costs and emissions.
- Safer workplace.
- Recyclable inks, coatings and product wastes.
- Positive performance advantages and economic returns.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The RadTech Sustainability Task Force has already developed "cradle-to-grave-to-cradle" life cycle analyses for the various coating and printing technologies, including energy usage, carbon footprint, transportation, emissions controls, waste, recyclability and more at each stage of production of raw materials and finished products, as well as the end use of the products and their disposal and recycling. Current plans include working with industry, academic and government partners on demonstration projects to develop additional data and practical insights. The resulting data will be used to develop additional quantitative analyses, as well as a working model for technology comparison, including economic factors. ◗

TABLE 6

Greenhouse gas (CO_2) emissions

		Technology		
	Units	UV-Cured acResin	Solvent	W/B Dispersion
Transportation	MT/yr	70	146	125
Electricity Consumption	MT/yr	2,389	1,682	3,279
Natural Gas	MT/yr	-	11,600	6,315
Total	MT/yr	2,459	13,429	9,719
Normalized Greenhouse Emissions	MT CO_2/ million m^2	32	209	253

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