

# Plastics News

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## Industry should embrace talk of benefits, responsibility of plastics

By: **Don Loepp**

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Are you comfortable talking about plastics and the environment?

The plastics industry has spent untold amounts of time and money researching and generating information on how plastics reduce waste and conserve resources. Yet there's a huge gap between how the industry views itself, and how those

on the outside view the plastics industry.

The result? Plastics industry leaders think they can play a role in helping the global environment, but it's having little impact on growing consumer sentiment in favor of restricting, or even banning, single-use plastics.

Consider this: The theme for Earth Day 2018 is "End Plastic Pollution." I've seen numerous news releases being pitched for stories about how activists have attempted to live without plastics. The spin is that it's a laudable goal to avoid all plastics.

Sometimes the criticism is unfair and the proposed solutions make no sense. Plastics are bad, but polymers made from renewables like corn, algae and mushrooms are good? It doesn't take a degree in chemistry to see the problem with that logic.

Conventional plastics do have a good story to tell and now some leading voices in the industry are poised to help spread the word.

In March, we published an opinion column from Bill Carteaux, president and CEO of the Plastics Industry Association, headlined "Banning single-use plastics is the wrong solution for our waste problems." The column was a reply to a *Los Angeles Times* editorial that argued in favor of banning all single-use plastics.

Carteaux said all Plastics Industry Association members, and their customers, need to "become a part of the conversation and work together to create solutions to better protect our environment."

What's more, he promised that later this spring, the Washington-based trade group will launch "This is Plastics," a resource that will "inspire meaningful discussions about the power of plastics."

"With it, we'll empower you to address these issues head-on and to articulate the importance of our products and explain what the plastics industry is doing to address problems in our environment and improve recycling," Carteaux wrote.

Coincidentally, Tom Salmon, CEO of Berry Global Group Inc., the largest U.S. plastics processor, offered a similar message at the recent World Petrochemical Conference in Houston.

Salmon said Evansville, Ind.-based Berry wants the plastics industry to take a collaborative role in educating consumers on the benefits plastics. The company has created a program called Plastics Ambassadors to educate employees and internal stakeholders about the benefits of plastics.

"It's time for us to speak with a strong and unified voice about the possibilities of plastics," he said, adding resin suppliers and other partners are already involved.

There's a risk that any information generated from plastics trade groups, resin suppliers and packaging manufacturers will be seen by outsiders as being self-serving or biased.

Still, I see hope for progress. It came in an opinion piece we published in response to Carteaux's column.

In the column, "Industry must share burden to reduce plastic pollution," Megan Byers and Scott Cassel of the Product Stewardship Institute still argue in favor of product bans. But they go a step further, calling on the plastics industry "to take an active role in the entire lifecycle of plastic packaging."

They make a pitch for extended producer responsibility, as well as for designing plastics products to be easier to recycle, and helping to expand recycling infrastructure and education.

I think a combination of these approaches has a lot of merit. Plastics processors, their suppliers and their customers need to have information about the benefits of plastics. But they also need to take responsibility for the products they make and make sure they cause minimal problems at the end of their usefulness.

Finally, and most importantly, consumers need to understand that plastics have value and should never end up as litter.

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