

Growth Through Innovations and E-Commerce

GE Plastics Expands its Product Portfolio and Service Offerings

At the inauguration of the new Customer Innovation Centre at GE Plastics' European headquarters in Bergen op Zoom/Netherlands at the start of June, the company presented its latest product innovations together with its e-commerce and service activities. These areas are intended to secure the company's future growth.

In 1999, GE Plastics achieved global sales of US\$ 7 billion, with Europe accounting for US\$ 1.3 billion of these sales. The company is intending to speed up its logistics and offer improved services to its customers through innovations in the form of a steady stream of new product developments, as well as marketing and consultancy via e-commerce. The com-

pany is rapidly pursuing this strategy and believes that it will produce sustainable growth. Sales are intended to grow 20% via the online marketplace in Europe, and a figure of 50% is being targeted for 2001.

Product Innovations as the Basis for Business

In line with its strategy of pursuing technical progress through constant innovations, GE Plastics presented product de-

velopments that mark a response to the new and modified demands of the market. These included, in particular, materials for the automotive sector, for electrical engineering and electronics, and telecommunications.

Prompted by calls from leading automotive manufacturers for reduced emissions and odours in their vehicles, new emission-reduced and low-odour polyphenylene oxide (PPO) materials (grade: Noryl) will be available for automotive engineering in future which have been

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specially designed for instrument panels. A further development is a modified PPO blend (grade: Noryl GTX) with a high thermal conductivity, for online paintable body components. GE Plastics (GEP) presented a world first in the form of a material with the trial designation W4, presumably a polycarbonate copolymer, which is suitable for the production of body parts. This plastic is claimed to have a high-gloss surface and long-lasting gloss retention and colour fastness, even if the car is exposed to constant weathering. No top coat or clear lacquer is required.

A series of newly-developed ABS materials (grade: Cycolac) meet the requirements of the electrical industry for improved flame protection with lower emissions and a higher chemical resistance. GEP is additionally offering two new (PC+ASA) blends (grade: Geloy) with improved heat resistance and impact strength. The new developments in the field of PBT (grade: Valox) include a new extrudable product type which fulfils the requirements for hollow cables for optical waveguides. A further PBT type can be used for a flame-retardant transport belt which causes less friction. A high chemical resistance is the special characteristic of an (ABS+PBT) blend (grade: Cytra) which has been designed for body-care products, such as electric shavers.

Procedures Sped up by E-Commerce

Since April, GE Plastics has placed a range of electronic tools and services at the disposal of its customers in Europe too, at www.geplastics.com. The company tested its e-commerce platform with 50 pilot customers at the start of April. Registered customers in Europe now have unlimited access to the central GEP website.

GEP is hoping to process transactions for a value of US\$ 15 million via the Internet in the second quarter of this year already. Some US\$ 90 million is to be achieved via this electronic marketing route by the end of the year. The 100% subsidiary, GE Polymerland, will be the exclusive online dealer for GEP products. GEP is expecting sales of US\$ 1 billion from its world-wide selling via the Internet.

Customers who place a product order online via GE Polymerland will be able to access the Customer Centre at all times, as registered users. Users can place, modify or cancel orders via this route. The next generation of order centre for Europe, which is currently under development, will then permit the customer to check product price lists and product availability in real time and track the dispatch of goods that have already been ordered.

GE Plastics is the first global player on the plastics market to auction residual stocks of older materials, of an unchanged high quality, online at special prices. The online auction page with the applicable conditions and rules may be found at www.gepauktion.com.

Service Marks the Key to Success

The *Design Solutions Centre* offers an extended, rapid service to customers looking for design solutions (Fig. 1). This integrated online workspace gives customers the opportunity to work with GEP staff and process engineers, as well as with mould builders and die-makers, for example, who co-operate on projects. This workspace offers all those with access to the project site the chance to pose questions, put forward solutions, call up GEP data and archive data and documents of relevance to the project. Online seminars constitute a further flexible addition. These enable customers to participate in a real-time presentation, with the opportunity to pose questions.

Since May of this year, the innovative online *ColorXpress* service, which can be accessed via the global GE Plastics website, has made colour-matching easier for customers. *ColorXpress Select* gives the customer the opportunity to request colour charts for all the engineering plastics currently in production, which will then be ready to dispatch within 48 h (Fig. 2). Customers wishing to perform a more extensive "full colour match" can order the required colour combination for the corresponding plastic in a sample quantity of 25 kg via the *ColorXpress Match* Service. This will then be ready for dispatch within 96 h.

GEP's *LotXpress* service is able to prepare quantities of up to 2500 kg in accord-

ance with individual customer specifications so that they are ready to be dispatched within 96 h. Polycarbonate (grade: Lexan) can already be supplied in a range of previously coordinated colour shades via *LotXpress*. As of the third quarter of this year, the ABS range will also be included in this service, before being followed by additional representatives of GEP's product families at the start of next year.

The *Visualfx* service gives GEP's European customers access to the entire global product range of colour shades and special effects. This currently takes in five main lines of colours and special effects, including earth shades (stippling, marble and stone), gloss series (scintillating and diamond effects), interference products (layering effect that shines like mother-of-pearl), energy effects (neon: shines in the dark (Fig. 3) and chameleon: colour changes with the temperature) and also diffusion materials which give an impression of depth (part of the light penetrates the inside of a product and part of the light is reflected at the surface).

"Since design and fashion are increasingly replacing functionality as the principle sales argument in a large number of markets and applications, we need to work together proactively with our customers and show them the possibilities that our materials can open up for them both today and in the future. Our intention is to assist our customers with the planning of their products in this respect to the greatest possible extent" explains Peter Wahsner, Global Program Manager Aesthetics at GE Plastics. To provide the wherewithal to do this, GEP has commissioned its own research department as well as external advisers to track down the trends in the use of colours and effects.

Gudrun Klein

Fig. 1. The Design Solution Centre on the GE Plastics website supports customers in their search for design solutions

Fig. 2. The online ColorXpress Select service gives customers the opportunity to request colour charts for all the engineering plastics currently in production

Fig. 3. The Visualfx online service gives customers in Europe access to all the advantages of a product range of colour shades and special effects