



New Plastic Heroes: HolyPoly

“Recycling Is More than a Trendy Topic“

HolyPoly is a watchword for fascination at the changeable nature of plastic material. But top of mind for the Dresden start-up are products at the end of their service life. The objective: to establish more and – above all – high-quality products from recycled plastics on the market.



Johanna Bialek co-founded the start-up and is head of human resources and organizational development © HolyPoly

Theoretically, plastic recycling sounds simple: making new products from used. Ideally, what this would elicit is a closed loop – as in the well-known PET bottle example. In practice, however, a number of hurdles may complicate what initially appears to be a simple project. The Dresden start-up HolyPoly wants to help brand manufacturers get over this hurdle. Their vision: a world in which recycling is second nature. **Kunststoffe** spoke with the two managing directors, Joanna Bialek and Fridolin Pflüger, as part of the series New Plastic Heroes. In this interview, they discuss the company's goals, the challenges of recycling plastics and the risks of greenwashing.

Kunststoffe: *Why does plastic recycling remain so difficult, despite modern technologies?*

Fridolin Pflüger: Ultimately, it boils down to three factors: the available quantity of high-quality recyclates, consistency in the material and, of course, the price. Manufacturers have been used to getting their material in exactly the same quality and quantity every time for decades, and specifications have become increasingly narrow. Unfortunately, the confusion of the circular economy has made it increasingly difficult to maintain this approach. Used plastics show signs of their usage journey,

as color and other properties differ from the usual norms. Moreover, post-consumer alternatives are usually costlier than virgin materials.

Kunststoffe: *How can this be changed – also using HolyPoly?*

Pflüger: Conversely, we mitigate the quantity limitations by leveraging our deep insights into the secondary plastics market, right into sources that are not readily accessible. This helps us extend our reach far beyond the usual distributors or well-known recyclers or compounders. Over and above their types, we look at many more, which helps consolidate our status as a go-to contact in the fragmented European market for recyclates.

Kunststoffe: *And despite this, valuable resources go missing daily in the form of plastic waste.*

Pflüger: As well as flying in the face of sustainability, this is also inefficient from an economic perspective. And that's why we directly address unused material flows by setting up and operating take-back systems and recycling programs. The next step involves us developing our own formulations and compounding specifications that modify the material for the desired application and compensate for input fluctuations. The crucial part is what comes next, namely: circular product development. Reflecting the primary goal of design, layout and manufacturing with the circular economy.

Kunststoffe: *You specifically address brand manufacturers – why?*

Johanna Bialek: If brands showing a clear attitude use recycled material or initiate their own recycling programs, the industry as a whole will also come on board. Brands dictate what is produced and how, and thus also what will later become waste. That's why we're targeting them and empowering them to really change course. The cultural aspect is also impossible to ignore here. Brands also indirectly convey values through their products. This allows them to promote a lifestyle and recycling and thus make it part of everyday life.

Kunststoffe: *But as research shows, this constitutes greenwashing more often than not. From your perspective: How big is the problem?*

Bialek: At this point, you have to look behind the words of what the companies really promise. As far as know, deliberate

falsehoods about the use of recycled materials are very rare. Instead, the topic of recyclability often emerges, which many already understand as “recycled”. Real recycling also only works if waste ends up in an appropriate infrastructure; unfortunately, this is almost never considered.

Kunststoffe: *When do things get trickiest?*

Bialek: Many companies look for the easy option, when advertising with the term recycling, but with few substantive changes to their economic and production approaches. Given a post-consumer substitution rate of under 10 percent in Germany according to the latest Conversio study, much remains to be done. And that is actually problematic: People are over-promising and under-delivering when it comes to really fulfilling these commitments.

Kunststoffe: *So it's all a matter of calculation?*

Pflüger: It's a gray area. We also have to accept that certain aspects of sustainability are contradictory and we have to maintain our stance as a thought leader on this without overburdening consumers with details. Many companies still lack any experience with communication around recycling and sustainability in their marketing departments. Experience shows that false statements are often made inadvertently, due to a lack of expertise and care.

Kunststoffe: *How can we stop that?*

Pflüger: A Green Claiming Regulation is currently being negotiated on a European level. This could then prohibit scope to make general environmental claims in advertising and marketing, for example, unless there is tangible evidence of excellent environmental performance on the part of the product or company. For us, regulations like these constitute an important signal in the sense of an emergency brake.

Kunststoffe: *This may hinder greenwashing, but probably not rule it out entirely.*

Pflüger: Correct! Simply changing a few rules or imposing a few bans is insufficient. There is a need for market conditions that incentivize circular value creation and the positive climate impact in general. If all players who are



Founding member Fridolin Pflüger is in charge of sales. © HolyPoly

actually serious about sustainability were given a clear competitive advantage and those who only pretend to be so were disadvantaged, greenwashing would simply no longer be worthwhile.

Kunststoffe: *Finally: we are currently experiencing a real recycling boom. What will remain of it in the long term?*

Pflüger: We are delighted at the growing interest in plastics recycling and the fact that more and more manufacturers also want to become active themselves. But it is more than just a trendy topic. Key now is to build on this momentum to establish a roadmap for sustainable and effective change. However nice the boom may feel – with the substitution rates in mind, we know the road to a circular economy remains very long and rocky. We need to transform the entire metabolism of industrial society. We have no other choice: hype that spawns lasting success. ■

Interview: Melanie Ehrhardt

Info

Facts on the Start-up

Name: HolyPoly GmbH
Founded: 2020 in Dresden, Germany
Total customers: 28
Number of employees: 25
Homepage: www.holypoly.co

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