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FROM: George Fuchs & John Daugherty

Formulating Printing Inks to Minimize Environmental Impact©

Executive Summary

This document addresses printing ink compositional factors that have the potential to impact the environment. These include the use of bio-derived renewable raw materials, the amount of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), presence of hazardous air pollutants (HAPs), heavy metal content and toxic/carcinogenic ingredients. In addition, printing ink manufacturers must take these environmental factors into account, while also providing a product that meets both the customer performance expectations on the printing press and the end use requirements of the printed product.

Introduction

At present, there is no regulatory or industry consensus that defines how to minimize the environmental impact of manufactured products. The USDA defines "environmentally preferable" to mean "products that have a lesser or reduced effect on human health and environment when compared with competing products that serve the same purpose". In the commercial context, it is generally accepted to mean the formulation of products with chemicals and other materials that have a relatively minimal adverse impact on the environment through the manufacture, use and disposal/recycling of the product. Printing inks as formulated chemical mixtures, have quantifiable properties that can be used to make technically sound assessments of environmental impact. In some cases these properties can be modified/adjusted to minimize the environmental impact throughout the products lifecycle.

All printing inks go through a conversion from a wet phase to a dry, durable film by a variety of physical and/or chemical processes that include oxidation, evaporation, substrate absorption or exposure to an ultraviolet light /electron beam source. Each type of ink has limitations in terms of the level of volatile content and ability to utilize renewable raw materials. (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF PRINTING PROCESSES AND INK REQUIREMENTS

INK TYPE	INK CHEMISTRY	DRYING PROCESS*	VOC COMPOSITION	TYPICAL % VOC	ON PRESS EMISSION CONTROLS
PASTE INKS					
Offset Sheetfed	Oleo resinous	Oxidation	Aliphatic hydrocarbons	0-20	None
Offset Heatset	Oleo resinous	Evaporation	Aliphatic hydrocarbons	35-45	Afterburners
Offset Coldset	Oleo resinous	Substrate absorption	Aliphatic hydrocarbons	2-20	None
Energy Curable	Acrylated monomer/oligomer	Polymerization	Unknown	0-5	Venting to atmosphere
LIQUID INKS					
Flexo-Gravure Solvent	Various resin-solvent combos	Evaporation	Various solvents	40-70	Afterburners
Flexo-Gravure Water	Various resin types	Evaporation	Alcohol (if present)	0-2	Venting to atmosphere
Gravure Publication	Resin-toluene	Evaporation	Toluene	40-70	Recapture
Ink jet	Solvent or water base	Evaporation	Various solvents or water	40-80	None

* All printing processes also dry by absorption into the substrate, dependent on the porosity of the substrate

Listed below are some of the key formulation tools that can be utilized to lessen the environmental impact of printing inks.

- Use of bio-derived renewable raw materials
- Minimizing or reducing the level of volatile organic compounds (VOCs)
- Minimizing, reducing or elimination of hazardous air pollutants (HAPs)
- Eliminating raw materials which contain toxic heavy metals
- Eliminating materials that are classified as toxic or known carcinogens
- Ensuring that ink waste can be classified as non-hazardous
- Ensuring the dry ink does not impede any potential recycling or biodegradation classification of the printed product.

Individual ink systems have specific performance criteria that can limit or restrict the extent to which these formulation techniques can be employed.

Bio-derived Renewable Raw Materials
For the purpose of this report, bio-derived renewable materials are defined as any material originating from plants, animals or naturally derived sources (such as water) that can be replenished in the short term.

The use of bio-derived renewable materials in place of petroleum sourced materials is a measureable property and is generally believed to improve ink's overall environmental profile. Examples are:

- Oils from plants and trees such as flaxseed (linseed), chinawood (tung), soy, corn, safflower, etc. (also referred to as vegetable oils).
- Materials based on animal sources such as fish oil, tallow, some colorants
- Materials based on insects such as shellac, some specialized colorants
- Resins based on plant or tree sources such as wood rosin, tall oil rosin, gum rosin, nitrocellulose
- Plant derived solvents such as ethyl lactate, grain derived alcohols
- Fatty acid esters such as tall oil fatty acid methyl ester
- Naturally renewed resources such as water

It is important to note that gauging the full environmental impact resulting from the use of these materials is highly complex and somewhat subjective, requiring certain assumptions and arbitrary determinations as to how far back one goes into the overall process. Minimally, this would include a comprehensive evaluation of the manufacturing process and refinement for use of the bio-derived renewable materials. The initial stages include aspects such as planting, fertilizing and harvesting, followed by the refining stage that includes air emissions, energy usage, water discharges, by-products and generated wastes. For example, plant derived materials start from the time the seeds are planted in the soil to delivery of the product to the ink manufacturer.

There have been very few life cycle studies conducted on materials used by the ink industry due to the complexities, cost and time involved. Battelle* conducted a life cycle study in 1998 of soy based sheetfed ink, but did not draw any clear cut final conclusions regarding the environmental impact of soy versus petroleum oils.

*Streamlined LCA of Soy-Base Ink Printing conducted by Life Cycle Management Group of Battelle, July 1998

VOC Content

Reducing product VOC content is a generally accepted technique for reducing environmental impact because lower VOC containing products emit fewer emissions during manufacture and use. Over the last two decades, ink companies have made a significant effort and investment in developing and reformulating ink systems that have lower VOCs than inks sold previously for similar applications while continuing to meet customer requirements.

The percentage of VOC in an ink is highly dependent on the type of ink, with some inks requiring a higher level of VOC in order to function and dry during the printing process. For example, a heatset ink that dries by evaporation will contain a higher concentration of VOCs than a sheetfed ink that dries by oxidation. Water based inks will generally have lower VOC content than solvent based products. See Table 1.

It is important to note that many printers employ sophisticated "capture and control" mechanisms to minimize air emissions during the printing process. Typical examples are publication gravure inks (largely based on toluene), where the solvent recovery systems used on the printing press are near 99.5% effective. The "recovered" solvent is reclaimed and recycled to make more ink or for other uses. Heatset printers using aliphatic hydrocarbon based inks, typically employ catalytic afterburners to eliminate or minimize VOC emissions from the process. A certain amount of the VOC in a printing ink is retained in the substrate. Most, but not all regulatory jurisdictions accept a 95% retention factor for coldset and sheetfed/oxidizeable inks and 20% retention for heatset inks.

Energy curable inks are another approach, as the amount of VOC is minimal upon polymerization.

Hazardous Air Pollutant Content

Hazardous air pollutants (HAPs) are those materials that are known or suspected to cause cancer or have serious health effects, such as reproductive effects or birth defects, or adverse environmental effects. EPA has identified 188 specific chemicals as HAPs which are listed in Section 112 of the Clean Air Act. HAPs can also be volatile organic compounds (VOCs) depending on the physical/chemical properties of a particular material.

Similar to VOCs, lowering the amount of HAPs contained in printing inks is another way of reducing the overall environmental impact. Among other requirements, The Printing and Publishing MACT standard specifies a compliant ink as one that contains no more than 0.04 weight fraction organic HAP. Some gravure and flexographic inks are based on high levels of solvents classified as HAPs and rely on recapture techniques to minimize emissions of such products.

Heavy Metals

Essentially, all inks sold in the U.S. today are manufactured without the use of compounds based on toxic heavy metals (i.e. lead, arsenic, selenium, mercury, cadmium and hexavalent chromium).

Federal health and environmental regulations were enacted in the United States beginning in the 1970's that made the usage of the known highly toxic metals as printing ink formulation components an unattractive option and ultimately resulted in the large-scale removal of these metals from commercial usage in printing inks. For further information, see NPIRI Bulletin 08-05, Metals in Printing Inks.

Absence of Toxic or Carcinogenic Chemicals

Ink manufacturers, for the most part, use materials that are classified as nontoxic and noncarcinogenic according to the OSHA hazardous classification. Exceptions must be listed on the product MSDS.

Recycling of Printed Products

Most inks can be de-inked from printed paper so that the paper can be recycled to create fiber used to make more paper. When inks are printed on other substrates such as plastic films, rigid plastics, glass or metal, other recycling methods need to be utilized.

Regulatory Classification of Waste Ink

Hazardous waste is defined by the EPA under the Resource Conservation & Recovery Act (RCRA) regulations. Non-solvent waste ink that has not been contaminated with other pressroom materials is not considered a hazardous waste. Any ink waste containing solvents with a flash point of less than 100 degrees F would be classified as hazardous due to flammability. De-inking sludge from the recycling of printed materials would have the same classification.

Biodegradability Status
First one must define biodegradability. ASTM has set forth the following definition: (from ASTM E1279-89(2008)
".....The transformation of the test substance to an extent sufficient to remove some characteristic property of the molecule, resulting in the loss of detection by the chemical specific analytical technique, is referred to as primary biodegradation."

U.S. FTC CFR 16 Part 260, "Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims" states that claims of degradability, biodegradability or photodegradability should be qualified to the extent necessary to avoid consumer deception about: (1) the product or package's ability to degrade in the environment where it is customarily disposed; and (2) the rate and extent of degradation." Further, the degradable, biodegradable or photodegradable status must be substantiated by competent and reliable scientific evidence that the entire product or package will completely break down and return to nature, i.e., decompose into elements found in nature within a reasonably short period of time after customary disposal.

It is important to recognize that these biodegradability definitions would exclude the vast majority of commercially available chemicals. While there are individual printing ink components that meet the definitions, generally the mixture as a whole would not qualify as biodegradable.

The ink industry position on biodegradability is as follows:

- It is important to recycle printed materials. Landfill disposal or incineration is an unnecessary waste of precious resources. Scientific research has demonstrated that very little biodegradability takes place in modern sanitary landfills due to the lack of exposure to air.

- Due to the small quantity of ink in relation to the much larger amount of substrate, ink has a minimal or negligible impact on biodegradability when printed materials go to landfills.

Summary
There are factors other than ink composition that play a role in environmental impact. This would include sustainability based on life cycle analysis of the materials, ink manufacturing and the printing process. These will be addressed in future reports.

**National Printing Ink Research Institute / 581 Main Street
Woodbridge, New Jersey 07095-1104 / Phone: 732-855-1525 / Fax: 732-855-1838**