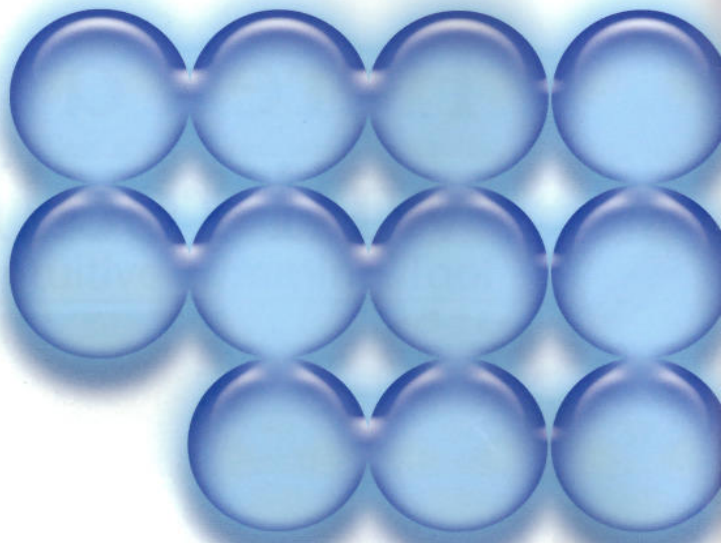


By Ivan Smith

On the face of it, the industry of plastic visual display is a relatively quiet one, where change happens gradually and innovation takes the form of evolution rather than revolution. But whether those in the industry know it or not, change is happening all around them, prompted by both internal and external forces.

Gary Hansen is Victoria state manager for York Precision Plastics, who supply imported acrylic sheet to sign writers and fabrication companies. Hansen says stability is the watchword: "The product is proven and people are happy with it. We do a lot of colour-matching for customers, and that's where a lot of development comes from."



Fantastic PLASTICS

[IN THE SIGNAGE INDUSTRY]

York's CEO, Chris Salmon, says simple economics have created stability. "Look at building and construction across the board – not just signage – structures and materials are cheaper than they used to be, so a lot of the materials have been around for 20-30 years, especially plastics."

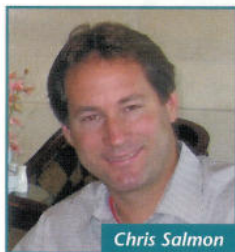
Historically, the key issues facing a plastic sign maker are "how long will it last?" and "how impact-resistant is it?" Over the years, some acrylics have reacted less well to being outside: the sun's UV rays, not to mention pollution, upset them and make them degrade.

But customers have demanded – and got – longer-lasting, more durable signs, that are easier to maintain. Cast acrylic, formed between sheets of glass, is good for forming and moulding; more durable extruded-acrylic comes out of its extruder with its molecules all in a line.

A walk through any town will reveal streetscapes very different from those 20 years ago: shop fronts, service stations; car showrooms; even buildings themselves are locations of constant, sometimes barely detectable, change.

"The product life-cycle demanded is not as long as it used to be," asserts Chris Salmon. "If you were doing a sign 20 years ago, they'd want it for 20 years. Now it's in the vicinity of five to 10 years. The demand has mirrored the materials that go into it."

"With the application of digitally produced graphics it becomes a less-expensive option to change a sign," agrees Johnson. "It tends to polarise the substrates a little bit. For the signs designed to be up for a long time there's the technology to produce a sign that will last longer and still maintain the looks and appearance. But there's also a group of products where the substrate is designed for a short life and the graphic on it is going to get changed. Instead of having a large number of products that are fairly interchangeable, you have a premium grade."



Chris Salmon

At the forefront of much that is new is undoubtedly the Albert Smith Group. They do not, you will note, make signs, but offer "external branding solutions". If there is innovation at all within this industry, it is demanded by Albert Smith's high-paying corporate customers and satisfied by the company's impressive R&D facility.

"Branding these days is not just a sign – it's an architectural statement," says the group's general manager Mitchell Smith. "Like building cladding; like those BP service stations with the green bull-nose; like Peugeot with their blue buildings."

"Branding has much more focus than it used to be. It has taken on a new dimension. This started in the late '80s and continues to evolve. We just did a massive statue – a sculpture – out the front of the Federal Magistrates Court, because a statement needed to be made."

With the demand, and the financial means, Smith says the company scours the world for new materials; a major new plastic brand might come onto the market once a year. "In the old days there were only polycarbonates. UV stability has played a big part. Some of the vinyls we're getting with the coatings over the top last 20 years – 10 years ago that was unheard of. The impact-resistance of a lot of the translucent

substrates we use, like acrylics and cycloids, has increased a lot – because of demand."

One unwelcome legend hanging around the industry is that thermoforming – the moulding of acrylic into a desired shape – leads to a more fragile, brittle material. Jim Ashton, sales manager at established sheet-importer Plastral, is keen to kick this into touch: "Not true at all. It's a myth. We offer a 10-year guarantee (on thermoformed acrylic signage) – but

manufacturers have to use it according to the recommendations. You get some cowboys that don't thermoform it at the right temperatures, or they use shortcuts that can cause problems in the material. But properly



Jim Ashton