

Chapter 1

Introduction

Reference books can be difficult to read and understand. Often technical connections and contexts are described by using a lot of mathematics—and often right from the beginning—so that a large part of the target group is overcharged or quickly loses interest. However, reading books on technology and engineering can be fun. Books dealing with technology should impart knowledge at an adequate pace. We live in a world that is dependent on a multitude of technologies. Yet it can be observed that fewer and fewer young people are interested in technical professions. What are the reasons for this development? It is true that the rush of today’s technology can initially have a discouraging effect. A lot of technology has become so complex and abstract that it is no longer possible to understand the connections through mere reflection or observation. As the modifications to technologies and processes come even faster, is it possible to keep up with these developments? The answer is yes!

There will always be technological development because economic issues and ecology are driving forces. Technological advancements, however, depend on the degree to which enthusiasm for technology can be aroused in persons with a certain talent and a disposition toward engineering. To some extent this book is based on a series of lectures called the “Basics of Thermoforming.” Among these lectures the discussions range over many topics, even to the “mere” production of a yogurt cup.

There are many people who are not directly involved in the development of technologies but who exert nonetheless an influence on technological developments. These decision makers, however, do depend on basic knowledge of the technological linkages and contexts.

This book is intended as a reference book for the relatively small industrial sector of thermoforming applications. This book focuses on thermoformed products and applications. All of us once had the experience of asking ourselves, when contemplating a formed part, how was this part produced? This book is subdivided into the description of technical formed parts and of packaging.

Some parts may not even look like thermoformed parts to the casual observer. This book will discuss the enormous possibilities of thermoforming at a level that

presents an overview of the diversity of this plastics-processing method for nonprofessionals. At the same time the book includes useful detailed knowledge for the professional practitioner.

This book takes the thermoformed part and traces it back to the process chain. Machine and tooling technologies and the possible automation steps are explained in full detail, as are the materials used. For the description of the materials, the effects of the extrusion process are also considered and the characteristics of the raw materials are explained. Where the process chains are similar for some of the described applications, only the distinctive features are identified. The book also describes methods for the optimization of the thermoforming process.

If you look closely at your surroundings, you will find countless objects in your daily use that were produced using the thermoforming process. Bath and shower tubs are thermoformed parts and among the first thermoforming products you will see on entering your bathroom in the morning. If you decide to use a new toothbrush, you have to tear open its packaging made of thermoformed material. Opening your fridge, you will see thermoformed yogurt cups, and even your fridge itself has a thermoformed interior housing (liner). Even though thermoforming is being more and more used for automobile interiors and exteriors, the automotive industry has not yet played a big role in plastics engineering. But the pressure for more efficiency, cost cutting, and longer durability of some products has managers changing their outlook on thermoforming.

Thermoforming has a vast area of applications. From bathtub to toothbrush blister, from a cookie tray to a car roof, it does not matter which product you look at; most often it is a high tech application.

This book should help give an overview and insight in this advanced technology. There are different processes you can use depending on the application you need. The machine technology is getting more refined, enabling users to get with higher productivity, better quality, less material cost, and so forth. With the use of new machine drive concepts and digital machine control systems, modern machines need less energy.

The mold technology has dramatically developed in the past few years. Flexible molds require less change over times. This book shows the possibilities available with the new standard technology.

The literature so far has covered little regarding the handling of the semifinished products and formed parts, as well as further handling in inline processes. Automation is well on its way and will not stop for technical parts or in the packaging industry. This book will show the possibilities of automated processes. The forming, filling, and sealing processes will be reviewed in particular, as these processes are not exhaustively treated in other works of literature.

Many innovations, such as thermoformed automobile body parts or fully automated packaging assembly lines, include end packaging. These innovations need to be discussed in a written work and so are addressed in this book.

A discussion of thermoforming should also include the various developments from the resin producers and semifinished product producers. A large part of the book will cover such materials, so that the book will serve as a useful reference.

The discussions of multilayer laminates have applications ranging from fuel tanks to the packaging of cheese.

The simulation of formed parts will be covered in another chapter in this book. The thermoforming simulation is even less discussed than, for example, simulation for injection molding. This and many other procedures of the entire field of thermoforming are described in this book.

The book therefore takes a comprehensive view of thermoforming and shares the expert knowledge of experienced thermoformers. With regard to the available literature, the application of thermoforming differs significantly from that of injection molding, and it is all the more important to assemble the available knowledge on thermoforming, as it is in this book. While much information contained in this book can be researched, the thermoforming applications assembled here will help the user to better understand the end results.

Of course, companies that specialize in thermoforming processes are dependent on their workers' know-how. In many circumstances knowledge of the tricks of thermoforming can lead to significant competitive disadvantages. Indeed I have benefited from people who supported the ideal of this book by divulging their knowledge. Experienced thermoformers, for example, Dr. Manfred Reichert, Horst R. Dänzer, and above all Rudi Salmang, have greatly contributed to the writing of this book. For several decades they have collected experiences in the field of thermoforming and the related processing steps. They were all willing to share their knowledge. For these persons it is certainly true that tradition does not mean the keeping of the ashes, but the passing on of the fire.

The compilation of the book was also supported by a number of companies that, despite the hard times during the economic crisis in 2009 to 2010, made a point of describing interesting applications and providing information. First of all Kiefel GmbH, Freilassing, Germany, must be mentioned. Here the support was chiefly provided by Erwin Wabnig and Reinhold Plot, who in the European Thermoforming Division are deeply involved with the Society of Plastic Engineers. Both men significantly contributed to the development of this book by drawing attention to interesting research at their company and providing relevant information. Likewise Geiss AG, Seßlach, Germany, contributed to the making of this book by providing information. Manfred Geiss, in particular, must be mentioned, who, as is well known, always presents up-to-date technologies in his speeches. Thanks must additionally be extended to the tooling manufacturer Bosch Sprang BV, Netherlands, especially to Berry Smeulders, who gave information about interesting examples arising from engineering practices.

A large part of the book deals with the description of raw materials. It is very gratifying that so many companies and persons who were interviewed were so willing to share their knowledge; they significantly raised my understanding of thermoforming materials. My particular interest in writing this book is to sensitize the user to the connection between knowledge of the materials and successful thermoforming production. So far this is an area where not all phenomena have been recognized. The more knowledge we have about materials and their processing characteristics, the more economic efficiency we can impart to production.

Special thanks goes to Paul de Mink of Borealis, Austria, who shared his knowledge about extrusion and thermoforming of PP. Rudi Salmang also contributed his profound knowledge on extrusion and thermoforming of PS. Furthermore, he shared his vast experience in helping to proofread the final typescript of this book. Additional thanks go to Willy Onclin, PhD, of Eastman Chemical BV, the Netherlands, and Frank Kleinert of Klöchner Pentaplast GmbH & Co. KG, Germany, for their counsel regarding the development of the articles dealing with PET material.

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All other persons who contributed to the development of this book are referred to in the relevant chapters. Last, but not least, I would particularly like to thank Gerhard Schubert, one of the most innovative machine designers, for his support.

In this book a semifinished product that can be wound is referred to as “film.” Any semifinished product that, due to its material thickness, cannot be wound, is referred to as “sheet.” While this book is an attempt to explain the world of thermoforming, it lays no claim to completeness or universal validity and assumes no liability.

Several persons and companies which deal with thermoforming are deliberately cited. The experiences of the author show that this provides support for someone who is seeking advice.

Naturally, the number of applications described in the book is not all-encompassing, because this book can only provide an overview about the various possibilities. Also, in this regards, only one reference per topic is mentioned in order not to create a competing impression.