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Eastman's Tritan shines at Housewares show

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CHICAGO — Eastman Chemical Co.'s Tritan copolymer was scattered all over the 2009 International Housewares Show in Chicago as the "go to" plastic to replace polycarbonate on dozens of drink bottles, mugs and other consumer products.

But the breakthrough product for the resin may have been the one that retailers didn't see on the shelves — as the faceplate in a frozen drink dispenser.

"We're looking at this [resin] for medical applications, for natural gas application, in the lighting industry for LEDs," said Jeff Applegate, president of Blackwell Plastics Inc., which began molding the faceplate last summer at its Houston plant. "This opens up a lot of doors for design and molding for thick parts."

Eastman, based in Kingsport, Tenn., introduced Tritan as a polycarbonate competitor in 2007. When the bisphenol A backlash hit the consumer market a few months later, the copolymer became the first choice to drop into existing molds and replace PC.

Brands like Aladdin, Camelbak, Nalgene and Vita-Mix began touting that their products were "BPA-free," while some have even co-branded with Eastman, listing Tritan by name, which will help Eastman develop its own brand recognition.

"Consumers are starting to recognize the name," said Kim Flanagan, marketing manager for Rolling Meadows, Ill.-based Thermos LLC, which introduced a Tritan water bottle to its line of Intak beverage containers during the Housewares show March 22-24. Intak's label lists both Eastman and Tritan, along with details about the bottle. "It's becoming a standard for products now."

During a news conference at the Housewares show, Eastman noted the increasing range of products using the resin. Beyond water bottles and baby bottles, it is being used in the Polar Pitcher, designed by Polar Plastech Inc. of Odessa, Fla., with an insert molded "cooling cylinder" which allows bars and hotels to keep beverages chilled without ice, and a cold water coffee brewing system created by Hourglass Coffee LLC.

Hourglass, based in Vancouver, Wash., first began developing the system in 2004 using another Eastman resin. Tritan added the ability to put the coffee maker in the dishwasher, said marketing director Kim Kapp.

But the faceplate Blackwell is making is not directly aimed at consumers.

The injection molded part replaces a machined acrylic part at the front of frozen drink dispensers in convenience stores, Applegate said, allowing Blackwell to not

only produce a part more efficiently, but provide a convex shape that helps draw consumers to the machine.

The faceplate is a complex mold, with walls up to 2 inches thick at some points, and must withstand temperatures ranging from 40° below zero for the frozen drinks and up to 160° F for cleaning, he said.

Its plastic must meet federal food-grade standards,

but PC cannot withstand the range of chemicals used in the cleaning process, while other co-polyesters tended to yellow over time, losing the "jewel" effect of the clear resin, he said.

Blackwell Plastics is testing Tritan on a variety of other potential uses, including pool and spa parts, which also must withstand a wide range of chemicals and



A cold water coffee brewing system is produced with Eastman's Tritan copolyester.

Eastman Chemical Co. photo



The faceplate for a frozen drink dispenser molded by Blackwell Plastics Inc.

Blackwell Plastics Inc. photo

cleaning agents.

PolyOne Corp. of Avon Lake, Ohio, which began compounding Tritan products early this year, has also been looking at additives that will add anti-shock and other capabilities to push the product into more uses in industrial, electrical and medical applications.

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