Breaking the silence on fabrics

Bio-degradable and recyclable fabrics for OOH advertising are gradually making a dent in the market, but these are still early days. Policy interventions, brand awareness, cost factors, and recycling channels will greatly determine the scale of adoption of green materials. However, the early steps in this direction are visible now.

By Pray Jani

Today, fabrics that are purportedly eco-friendly and bio-degradable are becoming visible in the OOH business, as replacements for PVC flex. Use of fabric material for outdoor advertising is gradually increasing in wake of curbs imposed on the use of PVC flex for advertising in the states of Karnataka and Kerala.

As other states begin to consider imposing similar curbs, the fabric manufacturers seem to be looking at business opportunities with renewed hope. The fabric manufacturers have two product offerings – one, cotton based, that is bio-degradable; and the other, polyester based, that is recyclable. It is not just the fabric alone but also the process of manufacturing that are hallmarks of eco-friendliness. Today, both the types of materials are seen to be suitable for outdoor advertising, across all media formats. **Diya Solanki, CEO, Jupiter Branding Solutions** says, "Both cotton- and polyester-based materials are stretchable, even more than flex. The stretchability is required only on backlit media on BQS and pole kiosks. Also, fabric is easier to mount on media than PVC flex."

Arindham Dasgupta, Business Head of Arvind Advanced Material Division says, "Our cotton-based fabric requires some processing in order to strengthen the material for outdoor uses. This processing is necessary since cotton's water retention is high and that not only makes it heavy, but also shrink in size. The processing is done using non-toxic, eco-friendly chemicals that are tested and certified. This is how Arvind's fabric stands out."

Any discussion on green OOH material invariably veers to the subject of cost-effectiveness. On this, L. **Manesh Kumar, COO of Shiva Texyarn** explains, "On an average, our products are distributed to the supplier at a cost which is at par to the flex. The rate of flex is almost similar, at Rs 2/ sq. ft – Rs 3 sq. ft." Cost is certainly a major factor when it comes to advertising but then again, in view of the overall campaign's cost, the cost of material and printing is a small proportion. Arindham adds, "It is a wrong notion that the demand for green material will be influenced

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Eco-friendly and easily recyclable	Product life in the outdoor environment not as durable as flex	Government policies support the use of green fabric	Lack of recycling channels
Almost every printing technology can be applied on it	Not as weather-proof as flex	Top brands are beginning to use green fabrics to meet their global mandate	Duplicate Chinese imported fabrics with PVC content
Expansion and contraction are controlled and the tear does not spread	Heavier and requires more passes while printing	Manufacturers are working on bringing down the costs	Lack of knowledge and understanding of green OOH in the OOH industry circles
Favoured in OOH policies across the country	OOH industry unwilling to adopt the new products		Opposition from flex manufacturing and distribution bodies

by the cost factor alone. The cost of fabric is only a small part of the overall cost of running an advertising campaign and, in my opinion, it solely depends on the brand's willingness to adopt this medium." As a case in point, if a brand campaign is executed on a total space of 1 lakh sq. ft., use of PVC flex will cost about Rs 3 lakh, whereas green fabric will cost Rs. 3.5 lakh to Rs 4 lakh. The new material is also facing questions about whether the printing registers well on it. On this, Arindham comments, "All the products can be printed using every printing technology available, without any additional investments. For the sake of green initiative, it should be remembered that Latex, UV or eco-solvent are the best available options to print on this fabric." Of course, when executing an eco-friendly campaign, it is counter-productive if solvent ink is used to print on green fabric.

Manufacturers are working on developing a material that can be printed on a dye sublimation machine. Diya points out that "dye sublimation is the most eco-friendly printing option available in the industry, and we are developing a material that can be used in dye sublimation printing. The problems being faced are in regard to the coating on the fabric material."

On the demand for green material, **Manish Taneja & Puneet Taneja, Directors of Taneja Technocom** say, "We have seen a growing demand in south India, even in places where there is no ban on PVC flex for advertising. Brands like HUL, ITC, Reliance are taking the step in the right direction by using fabric. People always follow the trend and use of green fabric is slowly becoming a trend when it comes to outdoor advertising. Soon, places like Himachal Pradesh too will have eco-friendly advertising norms. It is only a matter of time until someone takes the initiative on that front."

Speaking about some of the challenges that green material manufacturers face, Arindham states, "There is a lot of unmonitored influx of Chinese fabrics that are coated with PVC. We have done tests and found PVC content in all of these fabrics. Even a 2% content makes that material non-eco-friendly. The government should really look into this matter and curb the import of PVC coated fabric material from China." The other big challenge is that although polyester-based flex is 100% recyclable, there are not enough facilities available to recycle the used materials. This may affect the fabric industry if nothing is done about it. Jupiter Branding Solutions is working on creating a channel where they will recycle the polyester fabric after the campaign. If there is a lack of such channels, the recyclable products will eventually end up in landfills. Like Jupiter, other manufacturers need to extend their role from being only supplier to also being recyclers. Green fabric manufacturers are also seeing counter moves by the PVC flex manufacturers who are taking various steps to forestall government moves to ban the use of such material for outdoor advertising. •

Upcycling or recycling?

The options are there to be exercised

Considering the state government mandates that promotional material should be recyclable, it has become utmost important for the industry to search for the options to put used flexes into a better usage after their branding purpose is achieved. Here are some companies offering interesting ways to upcycle used flexes.

By Pray Jani

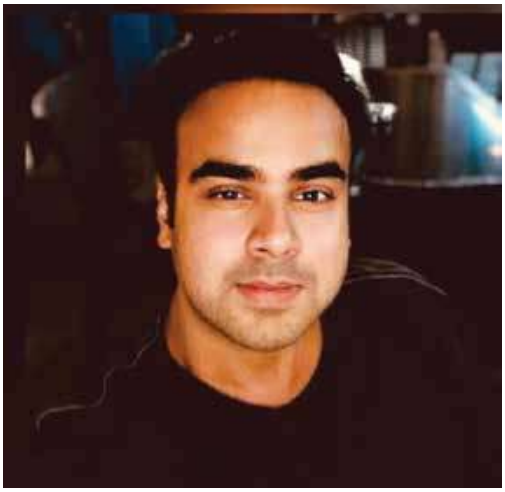
When it comes to green OOH practices, it is not just about using eco-friendly fabrics for advertising. Rather, the practices extend to areas like afterlife utilisation of the media -- once the advertising campaign is over.

Today, used PVC flex is mostly re-used for purposes like roofing of temporary shelters and small houses, covers for certain crops grown in fields, etc. But, eventually those flex material end up in the landfills that pollute the environment.

To prevent this, some players are ushering in upcycling of used PVC flex – a process by which a superior product is created from the waste. There are a few plastic recycling companies that are seen to be upcycling used PVC flex. Recycling is also being employed, whereby the waste material is turned into materials of lesser value. A few flex manufacturers in the country are taking the initiative to set up flex recycling units. Many plastic recycling companies are also working on or have developed the technology to recycle PVC flex.

Upcycling and recycling solutions

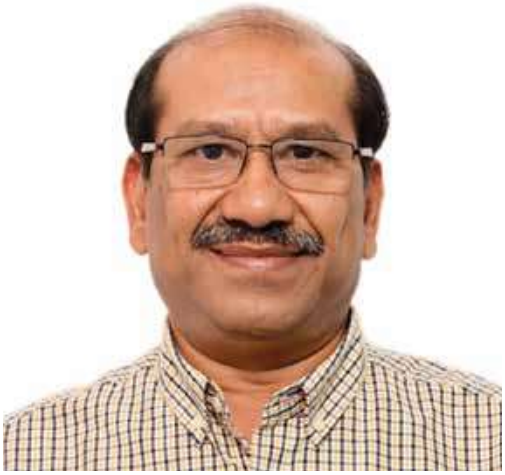
Deeya Panel Products is a certified recycling business based in Ankleshwar, Gujarat that recycles used PVC flex. The company is developing construction solutions using recycled plastic waste. They are now converting the used PVC flex into panel structures on which the advertising material can be mounted. “The recycled PVC product that we manufacture is sturdier than the metal boards put up on the hoardings. We are trying to create something that can be circulated within the OOH industry, so it has a higher value,” says Rahul Chaudhary, Director, Deeya Panel Products.



Rahul Chaudhary
Director, Deeya Panel Products

Noida-based Pioneer Polyleather has been recycling PVC flex for two years now. Following the ban on use of PVC flex for advertising in Kerala, the OOH media operators there have been championing the cause of PVC flex recycling and have reached out to Pioneer Polyleather for recycling purposes.

Some 30 metric tonnes of PVC flex was sent to Pioneer Polyleather last year put of the 100 metric tonnes of flex manufactured in India every year. Pioneer Polyleather converts the waste into products like ropes, trampolines, etc. “Re-using PVC flex is seen to be an unorganised activity. We are trying to make the collection and recycling an organised activity,” says



Mahendra Rustogi
President, Pioneer Polyleather

Mahendra Rustogi, President of Pioneer Polyleather. “We have been associated with the All India Laminated Fabric Manufactures’ Association to reach out to every city and district for building their awareness of the eco-friendly recycling process. We are also in talks with a technology company to create a tech-web to develop an online platform that creates awareness about this process,” he adds.

Even mega corporates like Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) are looking at ways to recycle single-use flex. Recently RIL announced a plan to construct roads using single-use flex and they have already constructed 40 km long road in Raigad, Maharashtra.

Challenges

The recycling of PVC flex faces multiple challenges. The general procedure to recycle any plastic requires the recycler to separate the types of plastics since each has its unique properties and needs to be recycled differently. When it comes to PVC flex, it is made of two different components, and to recycle PVC would require separating the two. Only then can they be treated differently to successfully recycle them.

Another challenge that the industry is facing is in dealing with the fact that PVC flex cannot be granulated – the standard form of plastic. Since PVC flex cannot be

granulated, there are little options that the material can be recycled into.

Also, there is no defined channel for collecting and distributing used PVC flex for recycling purposes.

Rahul commented on the challenges of recycling PVC flex saying, "The first step of recycling is segregating different types of plastic. When it comes to PVC flex that is used in OOH, it is not only the flex material but also the ink used on it, which needs to be considered. Sometimes these inks are highly inflammable and can catch fire when exposed to even little heat. That can be hazardous to the recycling process."

Secondly, the biggest missing factor is the process to create dumping units for the collection of PVC flex. Today, both media owners and recycling companies don't have a common meeting point to create a supply chain.

Thirdly, the government regulations are not clearly defined about the PVC flex recycling methods and technologies, at least not as clearly as in the case of recycling of PET bottles. This is why PVC flex recycling is not monitored well and encouraged.

The way forward

The question is, are we in need of upcycling solutions or recycling solutions. Both the processes have their advantages and be it construction of roads, or manufacturing of footwear, trampolines, or panels, the solution must not endanger the environment in the way that PVC flex originally does.

Certainly, upcycling draws higher returns but recycling is equally important. However, be it any form of processing, they have their fair share of challenges as well.

Many recyclers have been showing keen interest to tap into the OOH industry owing to its high usage of flex. According to industry sources, on an average a flex supplier supplies 500 truckloads in Maharashtra alone. Each truck has 20 lakh square feet of flex. Today there are thousands of flex suppliers in the country who serve the OOH industry. With such high demand, the only viable solution to go green is recycling.

The advertisers and agencies need to take greater responsibility toward ensuring that the used PVC flex goes for recycling or upcycling, as the case may be. ●