

Rolling along



Natural rubber is giving way to better-performing synthetics

Rubber users are looking at alternatives to improve performance

The Indian tyre industry is fully geared to meet the challenges of all the new cars on the roads, says Rajiv Budhraj, director general, Automotive Tyre Manufacturers' Association (ATMA). "With people travelling longer distances and more frequently, there is a need to allow them to be more confident and get value for money in terms of both, a longer tyre life and better fuel efficiency," he adds. "However, motorists need to realise the fact that under-inflation and poor maintenance detracts from high-performance tyres – the manufacturers and the government must educate them."

This, obviously, is a crying need. As Jasbir Singh, industrial advisor at the Union chemicals and fertilisers ministry, points out, the country has 3.3 million km of roads, of which 75,000 km are highways. And the XIIth Five-Year Plan gives the National Highways Authority of India a budget of ₹470,000 crore to build more.

The future is silica and polymers, says R. Mukhopadhyay, director, research & development, JK Tyre & Industries. With the European Union making tyre labelling for fuel efficiency and other essential parameters from 2012, this is the route the rest of the world will take. The challenge, he says, is to

"zero-mise" prices while maximising tyre life and fuel efficiency. Ecological design necessitates reducing noise, wear and rolling resistance.

Joachim Grub, head of the rubber chemicals business unit at German giant Lanxess – which organised the recent Rubber Day in New Delhi – has a different take on the acronym TLC, which usually stands for tender loving care: he defines it as tyre life cycle. Ergo, it makes more sense to buy high-performance tyres, even if they are more expensive initially. But that doesn't always work. "JK started making radial tyres in 1997-98 – but there was no customer acceptance back then," says Mukhopadhyay.

Dinesh Mohan, Volvo Chair for biomechanics and transportation safety in IIT Delhi's transportation research and injury prevention programme, points out that price sensitivity is very high in India, so R&D must focus on providing lower-cost tyres. "I used radials when I was a student in the US many years ago, but I can't afford to buy them as a professor in India!" he says. K.R.V. Parameshwar, president and CEO, Kluber Lubrication India, opines that a 10-per-cent premium on environmental and similar concerns is all right in retail. "But acceptance is zero in industrial

products. Legislation is essential to ensure a shift," he says.

Timothy Leverton, head, advanced and product engineering, Tata Motors, however, feels tyre selection is important because fuel prices here are high, "which is a big issue". The concentration on high performance is leading to the increasing use of synthetic rubber. Werner Breuers, member of the Lanxess management board, predicts that the ratio of natural rubber to synthetic in India too will shift from the current 75:25, closer to the global standard of 50:50. According to Carsten Spichalsky, head, technical office, Volkswagen India, this shift is being aided by the fact that India's "eight months of summer and four months of monsoon" put great stress on natural rubber tyres. "Synthetic rubber can be adjusted for this," he explains. But yes, he agrees, it's a price-sensitive market, and there's a need to focus on reducing the cost of raw materials.

The fact that rubber prices internationally have reached all-time highs, nudging \$500 per 100 kg in various global markets, obviously adds to the attraction of synthetic rubber, which is not so volatile. In India, according to Rubber Board statistics, the average price went up from under ₹14,000 in December 2009 to over ₹20,000 in November 2010, declining slightly to below ₹20,000 in the first fortnight of December.

It's not only in tyres that the need for performance is going up. "We use synthetic rubber for our floor tiles," says Thorstein Ameis, head, sales, export and transportation for the German nora systems. "It is the most beautiful, and sexiest, product that's made from it!" Adds T.K. Mukherjee, managing director of conveyor belts manufacturer Phoenix Yule, "There's a limit on the availability of natural rubber; so, we need to create synergy with synthetic rubber. Blends can create magic."

As Guenther Weymans, head of the Lanxess technical rubber products business unit, points out, customers will pay the "right value" of a product – like fire-resistant cables, or windmill seals that last a lifetime and do not change every year. The main task, adds Anno Borkowsky, CEO and

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president, Rhein Chemie, is to convince the customer about the value. "Our polymer-bound rubber chemical gives the immediate benefit of cost savings through better mixing, less waste and high quality." That seems to be one answer to the price vs quality issue.

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