Print-Applied UV-Curable Pressure Sensitive Adhesives for Industrial Graphics

Jeffrey Warmkessel, Ph.D.
Ashland Performance Materials
Columbus, OH, USA

Introduction

The use of printable pressure sensitive adhesives (PSAs) has been increasing in industrial graphic applications. These applications include durable labels, nameplates, membrane switches and graphic overlays. Flatbed screen printing is already commonly used to produce graphic overlays and circuits. Printable adhesives can easily be used with screen printing equipment and technology that is already in place in most industrial graphic manufacturing operations.

Advantages of printable pressure sensitive adhesives compared to the use of transfer tapes include:

- Waste reduction by printing adhesive only where it needed compared to die cutting and disposal of transfer tape sections (including release liner) in areas where the adhesive is not desired.
- Design advantages such as complex geometric shapes and moisture/gas flow channels can be accomplished easily by screen printing compared to the challenge of using transfer tapes.
- Elimination of adhesive build up on cutting dies by printing the adhesive away from the cut line.
- Reduced time and cost of screen preparation relative to the production of a cutting die for new designs.
- Potential reduction of lamination steps used in the assembly membrane switches.
- Improved bonding to digital inks compared to transfer tapes.

Printable PSA Technology

A PSA is a viscoelastic material relying on applied pressure to bond two surfaces together. A printable PSA needs to have the proper rheology and viscosity to be applied by its intended method of application, such as screen printing, flexography, rotogravure, etc. Printing a high performance adhesive is often achieved by diluting in solvent or water. While these products have desirable adhesion performance, their printing and curing can be challenging, especially when screen printing. The evaporation of solvent or water from the adhesive while on the screen can cause a number of issues in making reproducible, quality prints. Long ovens with appropriate air flow are required to remove the solvent or water after the printing step. These disadvantages of printing and curing are addressed by using a one-component, 100% reactive UV-curable adhesive. A 100% reactive adhesive does not clog the screen or change in print thickness due to evaporation. The products discussed in this paper have been designed to be cured with UV lamps commonly used in the industry for UV-curable inks.

UV-curable PSAs

Printable UV PSAs are liquid syrups that are screen printable and develop the desired viscoelastic properties upon UV exposure. The liquid syrups may be comprised of oligomers, monomers, photoinitiators, and processing additives that UV cure by free radical or cationic polymerization. The goal is to optimize the compositions in order to deliver cured adhesive performance properties comparable to transfer tapes that are currently being used in industrial graphics applications.

A series of three printable UV-curable PSAs (A, B, and C) were developed to cover the adhesive needs of most industrial graphic applications. The characteristics of the cured adhesives are summarized below. A commercial industrial transfer tape is included for comparison.

A = printable UV PSA with high cohesive strength and heat resistance
B = printable UV PSA with good tack, peel, and cohesive strength
C = printable UV PSA with excellent quick tack and peel
D = commercial transfer tape

Selection of the proper printable UV PSA depends upon the application's assembly and final use requirements.

Experimental

The three UV PSAs were screen printed at 2 mils (50 microns) adhesive thickness followed by UV curing and testing along with the commercial transfer tape (also 2 mils). The flatbed press used was a two-post semi-automatic with a 74 mesh, 120 microns thread diameter polyester screen at 28 Newton tension force. The flood bar pressure into the screen was minimal and the flood speed was slow. A 60 durometer, round edge squeegee at an angle of 15° was used to print the adhesive. The squeegee speed was slow and the pressure into the screen was light (just enough to transfer the adhesive to facestock over a 1/8 inch off-contact setting). The slow speeds and low pressure minimized bubbles being incorporated into the adhesive puddle on the screen which translated into fewer bubbles resulting in the adhesive prints.

The adhesives were cured with a 600 W/in Fusion ®[1] H bulb at 100% power on a lab conveyor unit. The A and B adhesives require a minimum UV dose of 450 mJ/cm^2 of UV-A. This correlates to a conveyor speed of 35 ft/min and was used to produce the samples for adhesive property measurements. An EIT UV Powermap®[2] was used to record the UV energy delivered to the adhesive (Table 1). All samples were cured in one pass under the UV lamp.

Table 1. UV dose and irradiance of 600W Fusion® H bulb at 35 ft/min

	mJ/cm^2	mW/cm^2
UV-A	481	1942
UV-B	427	1753
UV-C	85	359
UV-V	510	2090

The C adhesive can be cured over a range of UV exposures to tailor its performance for the application. If high tack is the primary requirement, a line speed of 45 ft/min or 337 mJ/cm^2 UV-A can be used, see Table 2. Subjecting the adhesive to more UV energy, such as curing at 35 m/min, will reduce its quick tack but peels will increase and some cohesive strength gained.

Table 2. UV dose and irradiance of 600W Fusion® H bulb at 45 ft/min

	mJ/cm^2	mW/cm^2
UV-A	337	1937
UV-B	298	1722
UV-C	59	352
UV-V	356	2074

While the results in this paper are for adhesive films cured with a Fusion® H bulb, it has been shown that a common electrode type medium pressure mercury lamp will produce similar results. Lamp input power settings of 200 W/in or 300 W/in will typically deliver sufficient irradiance (>500 mW/cm^2) to cure the adhesives.

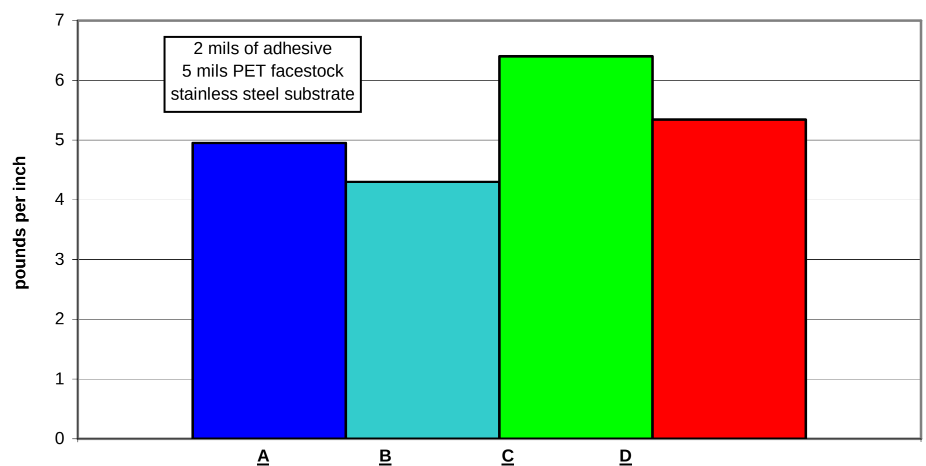
Samples for testing were prepared using DuPont Melinex®[3] ST505 heat treated polyester, as the substrate for adhesive application. 403 Stainless steel was used as the adhesion test substrate to bond the cure adhesive specimens. The stainless steel test plates were prepared by cleaning with acetone to remove residual adhesive. This was followed by sonication (30 minutes), rinsing with deionized water, and a final wipe with acetone. Stainless steel plates are stored in a constant temperature and humidity room (75°F, 50% RH) overnight before using.

Adhesion tests of the printable UV PSAs and transfer tape were conducted following Pressure Sensitive Tape Council test methods.[4] All adhesive samples were at 2 mils thick. Peel tests were conducted at 90 degrees with a pull rate of 12 inches/min on an Instron®[5] 4411 testing device with a 100 pound load cell. Static shear testing was started after a 24 hour dwell to allow the adhesive to wet out the stainless steel surface. The adhesive area was one inch by one inch with a load of one kilogram. The shear plates are at a 2 degree positive angle to eliminate peel forces. The shear adhesion failure temperature (SAFT) uses cold rolled steel plates that are degreased and allowed to sit overnight in the constant temperature humidity room before use. The SAFT procedure involves setting up a shear sample (one inch by one inch adhesive area) with a one kilogram load in an oven. Starting at room temperature, the oven temperature was increased at 5°F per minute. The temperature when the sample failed was recorded. Chemical resistance involved soaking peel samples in the desired media for the specified time. The samples were removed, wiped dry, and allowed to equilibrate in the constant temperature humidity room for 24 hours before peel testing.

Results and Discussion

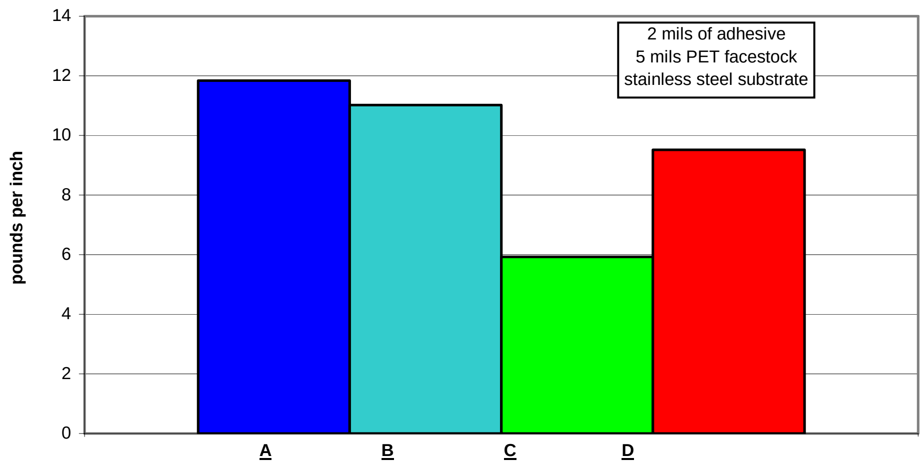
The room temperature peel adhesion was tested 24 hours after bonding. The 90 degree peel forces for the four adhesives are shown in Figure 1. Printable adhesive C was found to have the highest peel resistance (6.4 pounds per linear inch, pli). The transfer tape D and printable adhesive A had very similar peel resistance (5.3 pli and 5.0 pli respectively). While printable adhesive B has higher tack than printable A, it has the lowest peel resistance (4.3 pli), of the tested samples. It should be noted that A, B and D exhibited an adhesive failure with clean removal from the stainless steel. Adhesive C exhibited cohesive failure leaving residue on both the polyester film and the stainless steel panel. All UV PSAs in this group were cured at 35 ft/min.

Figure 1. 90 degree Peel Resistance at 24 hours



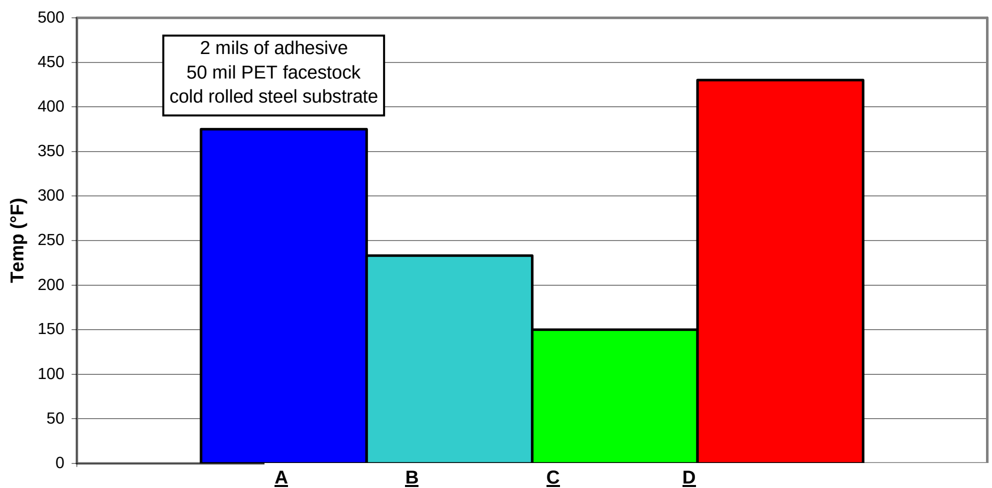
Peel samples on stainless steel were aged in an oven at 105°C for 10 days. After oven exposure, the samples were allowed to equilibrate at room temperature for 24 hours before conducting peel tests. Printable adhesives A and B gave the same result within experimental error (11.8 pli and 11.0 pli respectively). Both A and B exhibited cohesive failure modes during the peel test. The transfer tape D produced a peel strength of 9.5 pli. During the peel test of transfer tape D, it was observed that the samples had a “zipper” effect which is evidence that the adhesive hardened during conditioning.

Figure 2. Heat Aged (105°C for 10 days) 90 degree Peel Resistance



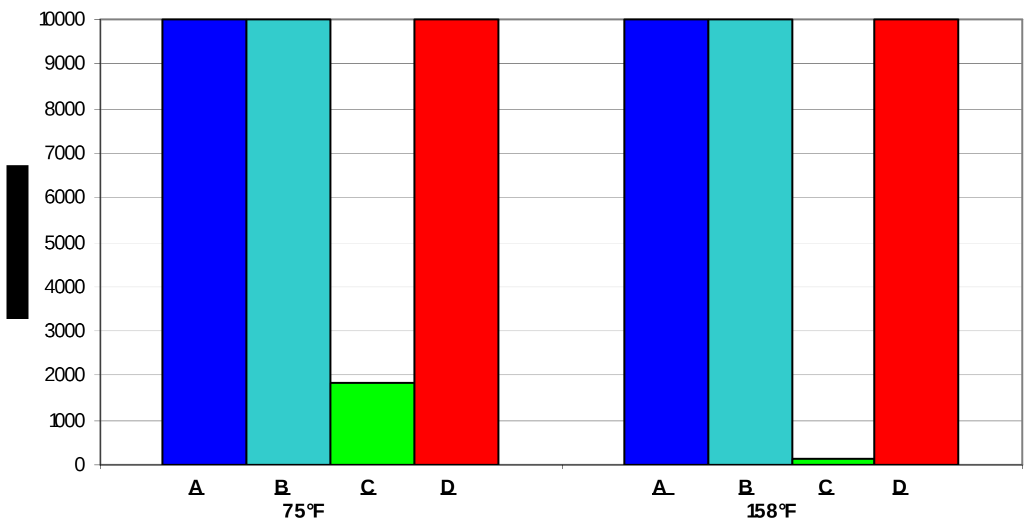
Shear adhesion failure temperature (SAFT) can be regarded as a test of the adhesive short term temperature resistance. Samples were subjected to increasing temperature. The temperature where the sample failed under a one kilogram load was recorded. The results are shown in Figure 3. The transfer tape D had the highest SAFT of 430°F. Printable adhesive A produced a SAFT of 375°F. The other printable adhesives, B and C, had lower SAFTs of 233°F and 150°F respectively. This is likely due to differences in crosslink density and molecular weight of the adhesive’s polymer chains relative to the transfer tape and printable adhesive A.

Figure 3. Shear Adhesion Failure Temperature



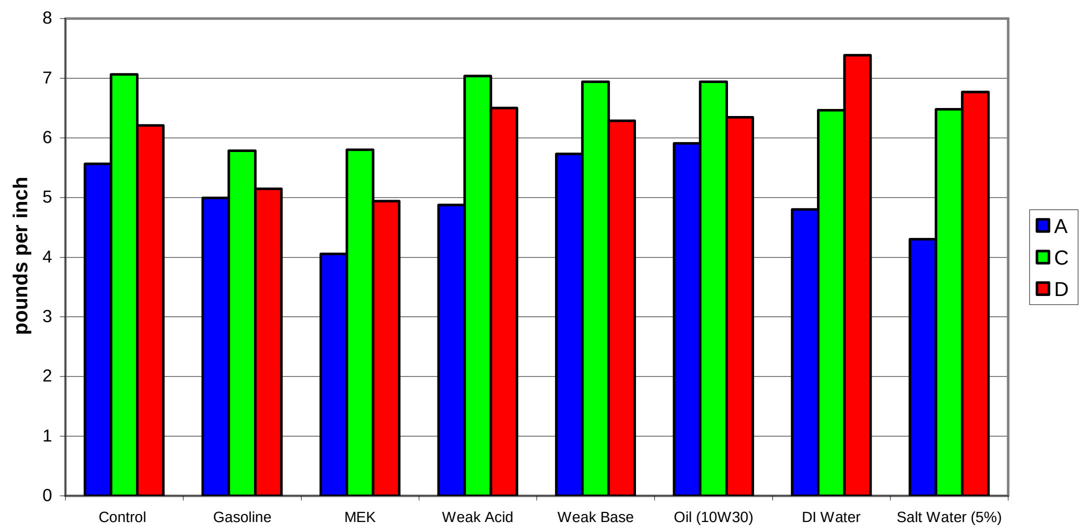
Static shear testing was performed at room temperature (75°F) and elevated temperature (158°F) using a one kilogram load. The results are shown in Figure 4. Printable adhesives A and B matched transfer tape D with all samples reaching >10,000 minutes. Extended testing of A and D have now passed shear tests of over 21,000 minutes (350 hours). Printable adhesive C which is known for high tack and peel, has low shear resistance (1860 minutes at room temperature and 60 minutes at 158°F).

Figure 4. Static Shears at Room Temperature (75°F) and Elevated Temperature (158°F)



Chemical resistance was measured for printable adhesive A, C and transfer tape D. Common ingredients such as gasoline, methylethylketone (MEK), weak acid (vinegar), weak base (diethanolamine), 10W30 motor oil, deionized water, and 5% salt water were used. Peel samples were constructed on stainless steel and immersed in glass jars containing the chemical test substance. One hour immersion was used with the gasoline and MEK. Four hour immersion was used with the weak acid and base. Three day immersion was used with the oil, deionized water and salt water. The results are summarized in Figure 5. All adhesives had good peel retention upon measurement after a 24-hour recovery. Immersion in weak acid, weak base, oil, deionized water and salt water had very little effect on the adhesive bond strength, especially for adhesives C and D. The largest peel resistance decrease for the adhesives were immersion in gasoline and MEK where the values were over one-pound-per-inch lower than the control samples.

Figure 5. 90 degree Peel Resistance of Samples Immersed in Various Agents



In addition to the performance properties reported above, the A adhesive was found to have very good bonding to digital inks (HP Indigo) relative to the transfer tape D. This advantage is significant as industrial graphics applications increase the use digital printing technology.

Conclusions

This testing shows that the performance properties of printable UV PSAs compares favorably with a commercial transfer tape. This series of printable UV PSA products was designed to meet the needs of industrial graphics and label manufacturers. Printable adhesive A having similar performance to the transfer tape is recommended for membrane switch and overlay applications where high temperature resistance is required. Printable adhesive C having high quick stick and peel resistance is designed for high performing label applications. End-use application testing has begun to confirm the desired performance.

It is expected that use of printable UV-curable pressure sensitive adhesives will increase as manufactures of industrial graphics and labels take advantage of process improvements and cost savings enabled by this technology.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges Renae Reeves her efforts in conducting the adhesive testing.

References

[1] Fusion UV Systems is a registered trademark of Fusion UV Systems, Inc.
[2] UV Powermap is a registered trademark of EIT, Inc.
[3] Melinex is a registered trademark of E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company.

[4] Test Methods for Pressure Sensitive Adhesive Tapes; Pressure Sensitive Tape Council, 14th ed., 2004.
[5] Instron is a registered trademark of Instron Company.