Bonding • Points of view

When good intentions collide: The psychology behind misunderstood regulations

We are standing—not only in bonding—at a paradoxical crossroads. On the one hand, our industrial world urgently needs to transform towards sustainability, circularity and smarter use of materials. On the other hand, the very regulations intended to accelerate this transformation increasingly threaten to hinder the very technologies—such as bonding—that make it possible in the first place.

We, who work in the adhesives and adhesive tape industry, see this very clearly. New regulations—whether in the name of chemical safety, eco-design, or product transparency—are drafted with the best of intentions. From our perspective, however, there is a risk that some of these laws could cut the lifeblood of an entire industry. Not because anyone wants this outcome, but those drafting the regulations often do not understand bonding and therefore not the significance this technology truly has and will have—if it remains available to us in the future.

They do not understand how adhesives enable lighter, safer and more repairable products. They do not see how a simple adhesive tape can eliminate the need for fasteners, reduce weight or facilitate recycling. They know nothing of the silent, cumulative progress to which we contribute—perhaps because we are not telling our story well enough and/or loudly enough.

But I am not concerned here with blame. What interests me is the psychology behind current developments. Imagine two professionals: a policymaker in Brussels, tasked with reducing environmental risks and protecting the public good, and a research and development director in the adhesives industry, working with complex formulations, hybrid materials and compromises in performance. Both care deeply about the future. But they live in different “cognitive ecosystems”.

“Bonding technology as a whole is under pressure—we must find new ways of forward-looking communication about a key technology of the 21st century.”
— **Dr. Evert Smit, President AFERA**

Regulators operate in a world of moral clarity: Reduce harm, increase safety. Engineers live in a world of trade-offs and conflicting goals: What is the best adhesive for the application and a circular system? Regulators ask: “Is this safe?” The industry answers: “That depends on the context, the use case, the lifetime, the degradation pathway.” The result: The answer does not meet the expectation. The conversation fails. And this is not out of bad intent—it is a classic case of what psychologists call the “double empathy problem”. This arises when two groups, with different perspectives and ways of communicating, struggle to understand each other—not because of bad faith, but because of incompatible mental models, without it even being clear whether common ground exists at all.

On top of this comes the psychological dynamic of “echo chambers”. Policymakers often consult NGOs, scientists and internal advisers but rarely voices from industry. Industry, in turn, communicates internally or with customers and suppliers. We talk about adhesion strength, peel tests, multilayer systems, and only slowly about how our use of adhesives reduces CO_2 footprints or rethinks and supports recyclability. Even when we do speak up, we often send the wrong signals, perhaps speaking the wrong “language.” Regulators want to hear ethical clarity and social urgency. We provide conditional data and technical nuances. They hear uncertainty. We see precision.

The current form of communication—which essentially produces no result—has severe consequences. We are not just talking about slower progress—we are talking about regulations that could exclude or outright ban important adhesive technologies without understanding what they achieve or what alternatives would cost in terms of performance, safety or sustainability.

We risk being excluded from the discussion—and thus from the future we are meant to help shape. This risk arises not only because others do not listen, understand and learn, but because we do not communicate properly. We must stop assuming that our relevance is self-evident and obvious to everyone. It is not. We must stop believing that the data we often provide will persuade on their own. They do not. We must stop waiting for others to “tell our story”. They probably will not—and if they do, we cannot be sure they will tell it correctly.

We must present the value of bonding technology in terms of impact—not just in terms of function. We must explain how our technologies enable sustainability—not just that they meet certain specifications. We must engage in dialogue proactively—not defensively, after decisions have already been made. If we do not change our communication, we will lose the opportunity to help shape the rules that will define our future. It is that simple. That is our part.

From the regulatory side, we must be able to expect that what is being regulated is technologically understood in all its implications before regulation is planned and that there is willingness to find a meaningful common ground. This will not be easy, as current issues are interconnected through diverse interactions and interests. There will be no simple path forward, and “wars of belief” have no place here.

Psychology, politics and communication are today interacting in the use of technologies such as bonding. We must work together to ensure that misunderstandings and narrow interests do not flow into regulatory efforts. This cannot be achieved by classical lobbying alone, but through insight, humility, a better story and the will to co-operate. I see this willingness on both sides, because our shared future needs “binders”—a connecting technology that could show the way forward.

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