

Description

Image



Image caption

(1) Expanded polystyrene © JensRS at Pixabay [Public domain] (2) Rock wool fire protection barrier within a polystyrene thermal building insulation © Cschirp at Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 3.0) (3) Surfboards with expanded foam core © TanteTati at Pixabay [Public domain]

The process

The snow-white, crisp, light protective packaging in which your computer arrived, and which you discarded, oblivious of its visual aesthetics, was made by EXPANDED FOAM MOLDING of polystyrene. It is a low temperature, low pressure, process using cheap mold materials, with uses far beyond those of throwaway packaging. There are two stages in its operation. Solid polymer granules, colored, if desired, containing a foaming agent that releases CO₂ on heating (a commodity product, widely available) are first softened and expanded by steam-heating under a small pressure. The softened particles are transferred to aluminum molds (to give good heat transfer) and steam-heated at 3 atmospheres, causing them to expand to 20 or more times their original volume and fuse together, filling the mold and taking up its shape.

Process schematic

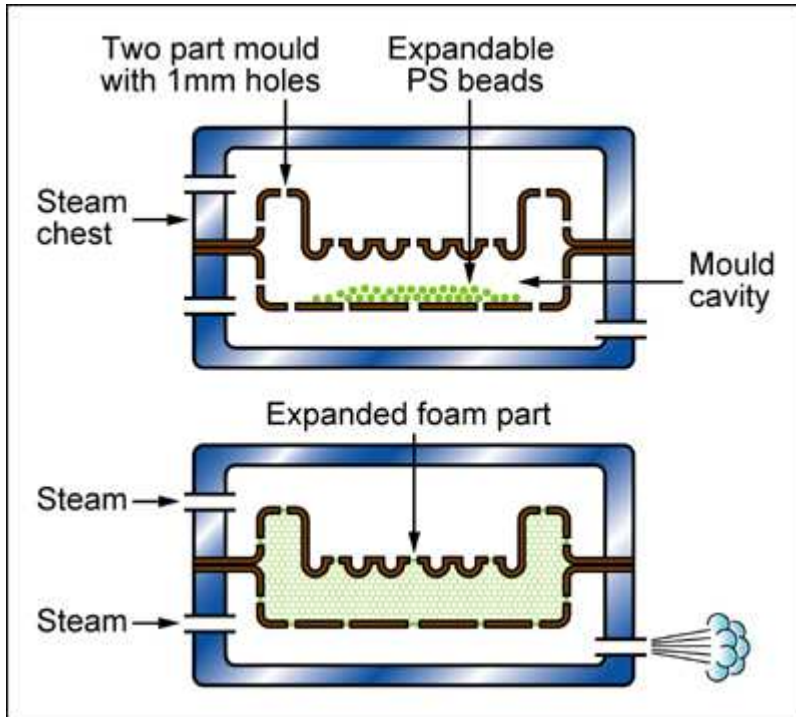


Figure caption

Expanded bead molding.

Material compatibility

Foams	✓
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Shape

Circular prismatic	✓
Non-circular prismatic	✓
Solid 3-D	✓

Economic compatibility

Relative tooling cost	low
Relative equipment cost	medium
Labor intensity	low
Economic batch size (units)	2e3 - 2e7

Physical and quality attributes

Mass range	0.022 - 22	lb
Range of section thickness	197 - 3.94e3	mil
Tolerance	19.7 - 78.7	mil
Roughness	0.394 - 3.94	mil
Surface roughness (A=v. smooth)	C	

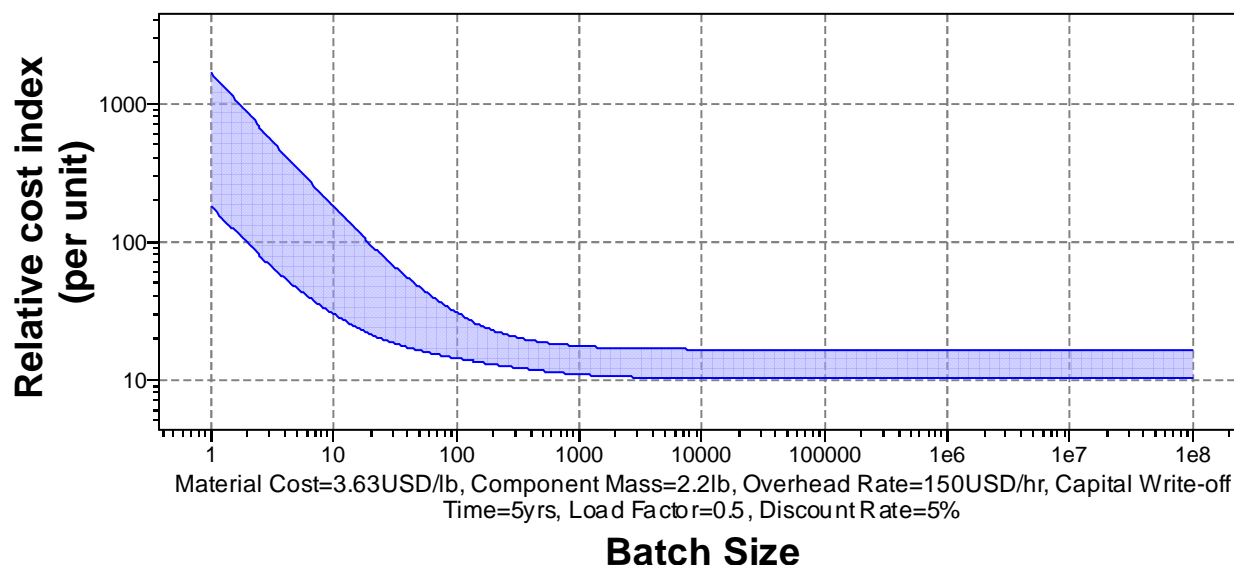
Process characteristics

Primary shaping processes	✓
Discrete	✓

Cost model and defaults

Relative cost index (per unit)	* 10.9 - 17.5
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Parameters: Material Cost = 3.63USD/lb, Component Mass = 2.2lb, Batch Size = 1e3, Overhead Rate = 150USD/hr, Discount Rate = 5%, Capital Write-off Time = 5yrs, Load Factor = 0.5



Capital cost	* 1.64e3 - 1.64e4 USD
Material utilization fraction	* 0.85 - 0.97
Production rate (units)	* 20 - 120 /hr
Tooling cost	* 164 - 1.64e3 USD
Tool life (units)	* 1e4 - 1e5

Supporting information

Design guidelines

Expanded foam molding acquires a smooth skin where it contacts the mold surface, and accepts detail provided the radii are greater than 2mm. The product is very cheap, gives good impact protection and can be recycled - so as packaging goes it is very attractive. It is exceptionally good as a thermal insulator - hence its use in disposable cups and cooler bags and walls for kitchen fridges, refrigerated trucks and storage buildings. Increasingly, designers see other possibilities: expanded bead moldings have interesting acoustic properties, complex profiles can be molded, the material is very light, and has visual and tactile properties that are interesting. But the components are very easily damaged.

Technical notes

Thermoplastics are easy to mold, polystyrene particularly so. Expanded foam molding gives a closed cell foam with a porosity of 80-95%. The high porosity and closed cells make it a good thermal insulator; the low density (about 10% that of water) gives it outstanding buoyancy.

Typical uses

Disposable packaging for drinks and food (McDonalds has been held to ransom for this), lifesaving equipment, water-sport products like surfboards and life vests; thermal insulation in coolers, containers and carriers, core materials for sandwich structures (window and door frames, floor panels), protection of valuable products such as electronic, computer or audio systems.

The economics

The low molding pressure and temperature makes this a particularly cheap process - hence its wide use in disposable, apparently valueless, objects.

The environment

At one time, CFC blowing agents were used for polystyrene expansion. These have now been replaced by gases that - in the volume in which they are used - do not damage the environment.

Links

MaterialUniverse

Reference
