

INTRODUCTION TO FUEL CELL TECHNOLOGY

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Fuel cells are electrochemical devices that convert chemical energy directly into electrical energy. All types are based on the same principles and have four basic components: electrolyte, anode, cathode, and interconnect. The different fuel cell types are categorized according to their electrolyte since it determines key features such as operating temperature, power-up time, type of fuel, migrating ions, and shock resistance. Fuel cells are generally utilized for secondary power generation, since in cases where they are not using fossil fuels – a possibility only for high temperature fuel cells – pure hydrogen has to be generated by using primary energy sources. Working fuel cell systems have already been developed by many companies in the automobile, electronics, and power generation industries. These systems have to be improved before they can compete on the market with existing technologies, by extending their lifetime and significantly reducing their cost. Two high temperature (solid oxide and molten carbonate) and two low temperature (polymer electrolyte and direct methanol) fuel cells are discussed in more detail, with a focus on the materials and the electrochemical reaction.

At this point, the quest for alternative energy sources has to proceed without focusing on a single energy technology, but rather following a parallel strategy and letting the new technologies compete before widespread replacement of fossil fuels.

“

I believe fuel cells could end the 100-year reign of the internal combustion engine.”

William Clay Ford, Jr.

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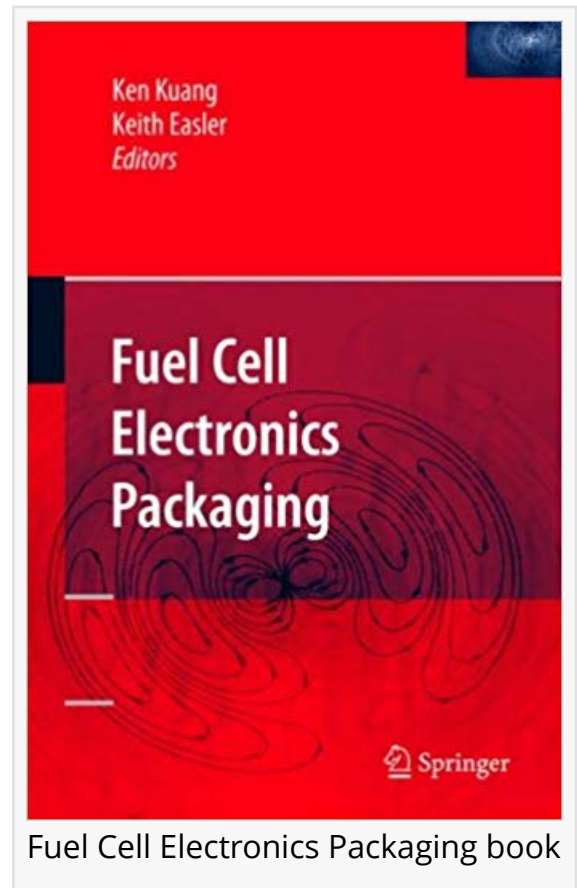
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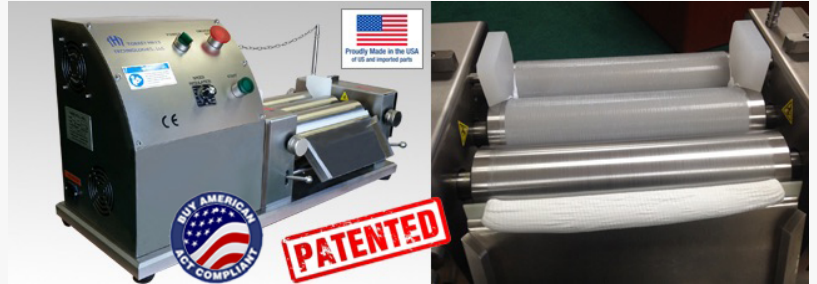
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