

“Building the Bridge”

By Devin Steele

Unlike most bridges, civil engineers aren't needed to build the structure that SEAMS has in mind for the sewn products industry. What's needed are thought leaders, influencers, innovators – those with the vision to create a platform to carry the sector to the promised land of fast textile and apparel replenishment in the U.S.

Getting to the other side of the bridge is important – nay, required – for the U.S. sewn products industry. Consumer-driven product lifecycle management (PLM) is crucial these days, especially for fashion, in order for retailers and brands to deliver product on demand, and to specs.

As you know if you've attended SEAMS' Networking Conferences during the last year or so, the association is at the forefront of, well, bridging the gap between brands/retailers and the U.S. supply chain as the movement continues to bring back textile and apparel manufacturing to American shores.

When Will Duncan of Will Duncan & Associates (WDA) was tasked with heading the association last year after two decades of exemplary leadership by Sarah Friedman that brought SEAMS to the age of the digitization, the changing consumer and reshoring, he elucidated a big, bold MADE IN AMERICA vision and growth agenda for the organization – and that not unintentionally coincides with the launch of a new visual brand identity and a revamped website that connects the right players. Appropriately, the theme of his vision is “Building A Bridge.”

For the last year, Duncan's *raison d'être* – through the direction of the SEAMS' board – has been to oversee the association in creating the building blocks to make “made in America” a reality by closing the gap for retailers and brands seeking an American supply chain.

At SEAMS' recent Networking Conference in Nashville, Tenn., Duncan reiterated to members the association's new branding, membership outreach, goals and more.

“At our last Networking Conference in Hilton Head, I talked about the brands and retailers that continue to source based on lowest land and duty cost,” he said. “And I discussed how they really aren't factoring in the actual performance at retail. They're not factoring in markdowns and stock-outs and true performance. It's apples and oranges, comparing domestic with a short replenishment supply chain.

“However,” he continued, “there are some brands and retailers that do get it, and they're starting to look at sourcing domestically, and for those reasons. The problem is that most of them, they can find a cut-and-sew guy, but it's more than just finding a cut-and-sew guy – you have to have a supply chain behind it. And they don't have the patience or the skillset or the knowledge to develop their own supply chain. They've gotten so used to the full-package model that that's how they want to source today.”

So for reshoring to occur en masse, ready-made supply chains must be located here, he added.

“And we have that within SEAMS,” Duncan said. “We're not as formalized as we want to be but there's a lot of business that gets done internally within our supply chains. But there is this void between brands/retailers and domestic manufacturers. And we want to build a bridge – we want SEAMS to be that bridge for the brands and retailers to source domestically.”

To this end, he explained a number of initiatives the association has taken since he formally took the reins at SEAMS late last year.

“We've put in the foundation for the bridge with our new branding and by launching our new website and building this power search tool to allow the world to find our members,” he said. “It's a portal to the world to find you. And we're building our base with 21 new members. Plus, we're broadening our reach beyond being just Southeast centric. We have members joining now from all parts of the country. And we're continuing to collaborate and partner with other associations within the industry and continuing to find more ways to add value to your members.”

But where there's a Will ...

“We want to strengthen the impact of MADE IN AMERICA in today's global economy,” he said. “We strive to be the most relevant force and voice shaping the growth of the U.S. fashion, sewn products and textile industries.”

Duncan said he has plans to make this happen by: collaborating and partnering, expanding SEAMS' sphere of influence and improving the value of membership, he said.

“I've always believed it is better to partner than to compete,” he said. “There are a number of other industry organizations that want to work with SEAMS that would allow us to leverage their capabilities. We are currently in discussions with several of them that would provide much greater exposure for our membership.”

By “expanding its sphere of influence,” he explained that the association is not recognized or represented in many parts of the country. To wit: With more than 200 member companies, 90 are from the Carolinas and Georgia. And there are 24 states with no SEAMS' members, so opportunities exist, he noted.

“These areas have businesses that are in textiles, cut-and-sew and technical providers that fall within our core membership sectors,” he said. “They currently do not participate or in many cases don't know about us. We also want to significantly improve our presence and awareness within the brand and retail sectors. Going forward, if they don't use us, it won't be because they don't know about us.”

Duncan and SEAMS indeed is poised to cast a wider net and raise the association's clout in order to become that “voice” he seeks for a reshoring sewn products industry.

“We ARE going to build this bridge,” he concluded. “So you, as a member of this domestic supply chain, better be ready. And, from what I've seen there is still significant work to be done in many of the companies I visit to be prepared to support the brands and retailers, as they are going to need to be supported. If you are not, you are going to miss the boat. Also, you can't do it by working in a silo. We have complete supply chains within the SEAMS membership for certain product sectors. And, there is a lot of business that is done between members. But it is typically informal and not structured.

“Moving forward,” he continued, “we need to form strategic supply chain alliances within the given product sectors where these partnered supply chains are ready made – even to the point where pricing and profit-sharing is predetermined for the partners within the supply chain. Then when the brands and retailers open the gate on the other side of the bridge we are ready and waiting for them.”