

2018: Overwhelmingly positive for SEAMS member companies

By Devin Steele

(Editor's notes: The economic environment continues to bode well for SEAMS and its membership as it remains steadfast to its mission to build a U.S. supply chain bridge to assist retailers and brands seeking to meet fast-changing consumer demands.

Reshoring, near-shoring and back-shoring will continue to be the inevitable result as these retailers and brands explore better ways to serve those consumer requirements for fast fashion, personalization, customization, sustainability, omnichannel experiences, et al., made possible only through local-for-local and on-demand production in this country and this hemisphere.

SEAMS members are helping to build that supply chain bridge, of course, so we thought it would be relevant and informational to see how companies in the association are faring as 2018 draws to a close and 2019 looms. As such, we sent questionnaires to a number of members to anecdotally gauge how their companies are doing as we continue our quest to repopulate the sewn products industry in America.

Following is input from participating companies on where they stand in 2018.)

After a few years of steady sales, fabric producer Apex Mills, celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, recognized healthy growth in 2018, according to Pam Siegel, chief marketing officer at Apex Mills, Inwood, N.Y., which operates production facilities in North Carolina.

“Having made an investment in smart textiles and machinery, we are better positioned to increase production and showcase warp knit fabric prototypes featuring conductive properties,” she said. “The made-in-America movement has also worked to our advantage as we are finding more companies looking to extend their product line to include items that are sourced and manufactured in the U.S. Lastly, over the past year, there have been improvements and new releases in fabric finishes creating inroads into new markets and enhancing products in markets we currently serve.”

Authentically American, officially launched as a startup business in July 2017 in Nashville, Tenn., went quickly from a blank sheet of paper to 150+ B2B customers, according to founder Dean Wegner, a U.S. Army veteran. The company was created to help bring jobs back to America by selling premium, competitively priced organization and consumer-branded apparel and other branded merchandise that is all made in America, he added.

“Arguably, it could not be a better time to launch a high-quality, American-made product that is competitively priced, and helping create U.S. jobs,” said Wegner, who counts among its investors NASCAR Hall of Fame driver Darrell Waltrip. “My assessment after speaking with hundreds of customers over the last year is that reshoring is for real!”

Authentically America received a great deal of attention this year, appearing in numerous national media outlets. Wegner and Waltrip even appeared on two segments of Fox and Friends on the Fox News Network. ([Here is a link to the first appearance.](#))

Jefferson, Ga.-based Buhler Quality Yarns Corp., the U.S. arm of 200-plus-year-old Swiss firm Buhler, is a leading supplier of fine-count yarns to the Americas. The business level between this year and last remains about the same, according to David Sasso, vice president of sales.

“The high ends tend to stay consistent while commodities seem to have strengthened,” he said.

And Buhler Quality Yarns’ products are on the “high end” scale, as it specializes in yarns manufactured from Supima extra-long staple cotton, MicroModal Edelweiss and Micro TENCEL, and offers blends along with exclusive Supima Cotton and high-grade yarn spun from organic cotton.

Fireflyline, which offers 3D virtual samples and fit improvement services to companies creating cut-and-sew goods, has seen its business grow each year since its launch in 2015, according to President Lacey Bell.

“Our clients are searching for efficiency in product development and improved garment fit,” she said. “We offer independent fit and patternmaking assistance, which is a talent gap for many retailers and manufacturers in the U.S.”

Fabric maker Hamrick Mills, founded in 1900 in Gaffney, S.C., experienced “brisk business activity” this year, according to Director of Sales Jim Hopkins.

“Some contributing factors have been the economy in general, some product shifts/modifications, market concentrations, some shifts in requirements for ‘made-in-USA’ cloth and, sadly, the attrition of some of our comrades in the business,” he said.

Like many textile and apparel companies during the past three decades, Hemingway Apparel, Hemingway, S.C., has endured the vagaries of economic times and has seen its business on a rollercoaster ride. But 2018 has been a record year of growth opportunity for the company, said President Chris Marsh.

“We saw a tremendous upswing in domestic manufacturing beginning the latter part of 2016,” he said. “In 2017, Hemingway Apparel booked production at capacity and remains booked at capacity to date.”

Jason Mills LLC, Milltown, N.J., has shown a 10 percent to 15 percent growth in revenue, with gross and net profitability percentages remaining consistent, according to President Michael Lavroff, whose company manufactures polyester and knit mesh fabrics.

“Sectors such as healthcare textiles and recreational textiles – including our impact screen fabric line for the golf simulator market – continues to grow in both product offerings and sales,” he said. “For what it’s worth, my macro-economic assessment is that the population is getting older and has more disposable income.”

LACorp, Lebanon, Va., which produces a multitude of diverse textile and apparel products, reported a “banner” year in this, its 50-year anniversary.

“We were able to add over 60 full-time jobs during the year as we experienced increased demand across all of our market segments served,” said Jeoff Bodenhorst Jr., president. “We have not been this busy since the early 2000s. We invested and opened up a second facility to be able to meet projected future demand. Our relationships with our customers attributed to much of this growth as this was not new business, but a continuation of already successful businesses.”

The overall strength of the economy played a great role in this demand from all of their customers, he added.

“Our flexibility and product mix also contributed to our success as we process both knit and woven sewn products in apparel, bedding, and many other cut-and-sew markets,” Bodenhorst said.

MMI Textiles of Westlake, Ohio, also reported an extremely busy year.

“With the introduction of new products such as Solution-Dyed Wolf Gray and Stock Solution-Dyed Webbing, and key additions to our team with international focus – added to our already strong domestic and import product lines – we are tracking to meet our pretty aggressive sales goal for the year,” said Geoff Senko, national accounts manager. “We certainly strive to serve our customers to the best of our ability and be the best partner we can be. The economy has played an obvious role as well. There’s no denying the pressure everyone felt this year at all stages of the manufacturing process.”

Champion Thread Co., Gastonia, N.C., experienced very strong demand throughout 2018, said Matt Poovey, company president, who also serves as SEAMS’ president.

“This has led to one of our best years ever in terms of sales and utilization,” he said. “This growth was enabled primarily by the automated, flexible manufacturing capabilities that we have invested in to allow us to be faster and more responsive to our customers’ needs for custom products and service levels they value.”

Specific factors that drove this growth were its ability to increase market share in both traditional and new markets for industrial sewing thread, engineered yarns and other products, he added. Champion’s participation in the Texprocess Americas trade show was also a contributing factor, he pointed out.

OnPoint Manufacturing (OPM), Florence, Ala., which offers apparel manufacturing, manufacturing services such as fulfillment to global distribution and integrated web services, saw a definitive uptick in business this year vs. last year, according to COO Matthew Cochran.

“We believe that due to the unique nature of OPM being an on-demand business with no MOQs, businesses of all sizes are seeing this model as a necessary embellishment to their existing offshore, mass-quantity, long lead-time protocols,” he said. “That is, if catering to the consumer and getting closer to market is something they are striving for.”

This was an evolutionary year for Trotters Sewing Co., which changed its name from BJ Con-Sew, Inc. and is still in the process of re-branding. The family-owned and operated cut-and-sew business, based in Asheboro, N.C., didn’t see a large increase in sales compared to recent years but did experience a transition in its customer base in general, said Lori Trotter, business manager.

“We have seen decreases in the output of our mattress cover and accessory lines, but saw an increase in the need to help local furniture companies with their cut-and-sewn goods,” she said. “We believe some of the global tariffs have played a part in some of these changes, as well as an increase in mattress Internet sales vs. the need for accessorizing bedding showrooms.”

Kristin Draper, president of Draper Knitting Co., is the sixth generation to run the family-owned company, headquartered in Canton, Mass. The company specializes in knitted high pile, jersey, double knits, napped fleece, single sided terry and nonwoven fabrics for fashion, performance, industrial and safety applications.

“Our business in 2018 was about flat from 2017 but the number on inquiries and projects

we are working on has increased and we hope this will convert to sales in 2019,” she said.

Another Northeast company, Gehring-Tricot Corp./Tweave, LLC, reported a moderate improvement in 2018.

“During 2018 we had another year of sale growth,” said Skip Gehring, president & CEO, whose firm designs and manufactures a broad array of knit and woven fabrics for a diverse range of markets such as medical, sports, safety, aerospace, apparel and military products. “The increase in sales from 2017 to 2018 was 10 percent. Major factors were developments and increased diversity of manufacturing.”

At Minnesota Knitting Mills (MKM), Mendota Heights, Minn., “our current customer base had organic growth from their existing product line expansions, which resulted in increased volume for MKM,” said Pat Hickey, acting president of its board of directors, whose firm manufactures knit trim, cuffs, bands, collars, braid knit, hats and custom fabric components for various apparel markets. “Of note, MKM is benefitting from USA manufacturing as tariffs take hold (or not), product quality becomes more critical and turn times important to customers.”

The year resulted in better business across many sectors of the textile and sewn products industries, said Frank Henderson, president & CEO of Henderson Sewing Machine Co., Andalusia, Ala.

“The two years after a change in our federal government provided a positive growth of 10 percent in sales volume and significant growth in reshoring and near-shoring of textile sewn products in the USA,” he said. “First-quarter purchases, already booked, are significantly stronger than same quarter of the previous two years.”

A Southeast-based fabric producer, who wished to remain anonymous, reported that business was steady this year, with a slight increase in sales from 2017.

“The market was more stable than in years past and our customers were more consistent with orders,” said a company executive. “I believe the overall economic improvement kept expectations at a positive level for our customers. We also made more improvements internally to allow shorter lead times, which creates opportunity to capture short-term sales.”

Another Southern yarn producer, which requested anonymity, said his company is 3 percent ahead of last year, which is “about what we expected,” said a spokesperson. “It is hard to grow our business in our established markets. The bright spots with the new markets we are moving into will grow our business in 2019.”