SEAMS' member Henderson Machinery serves growing customer base through diversification

By Devin Steele

GREENSBORO, N.C. – The leadership at SEAMS' member Henderson Machinery, Inc. doesn't like to refer to the company merely as a sales office or a representative, according to General Manager Brent Jones.

"We're actually an agent," he said during an interview at its headquarters here recently. "We're the whole package. We support our customers from start to finish. And that's what we do for every product we sell – from sales and service to training to electronic repair to spare parts to technical support."

Henderson Machinery, formed in 1973, serves as the agent for more than a dozen textile industry partners around the world, working with customers in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. And, like many of its colleagues in the industry, it has had to diversify its product market range and partnerships over the last couple of decades to remain viable.

The company was established by Mack Henderson as the sole U.S. representative of the Lonati Group, a longtime circular knitting machine manufacturer for hosiery, and continues to represent the Italy-based supplier as the second oldest Lonati distributor in the world.

Fashion trends, including a decline in women wearing pantyhose, as well as the offshore movement and other factors, pushed Henderson Machinery to expand its offerings in the knitting sector and beyond.

Along the way, it added additional partners and lines of equipment from Dinema (electronic systems) Fadis (precision winders), Santoni/Sangiacomo (circular knitting machines), Agteks (specialty twisters and quality systems), EZM/Proll and Lohmann (dye extractors), Tupesa (processing for garments), Macpi (pressing and bonding), Faitplast/WithME (elastic tape and bonding material), Ekoteks (ceramic items), Autotex (automation processes and machines), IMA (cutting and spreading systems) and Complett (seamers).

"Henderson Machinery was dedicated to representing only a few textile machine and equipment suppliers in the early years as the growth in that sector of textiles was explosive and expanding in existing and new customers," said Bobby Irvin, Henderson Machinery president. "Over the years the core segments softened due to fashion and market changes, and Henderson expanded into other segments and areas of textile-related products and production.

"With the diverse representation in various areas, Henderson can overcome any stagnant market conditions in one area of the industry," he continued. "With several suppliers, there is always one possibility of potential growth and movement."

Said Jones: "We're still dedicated to our sock/hosiery business. It's part of who we are, but it's not our only focus anymore."

"Our core is providing textile solutions," added Sean Burke, the company's director of business development.

Henderson Machinery employs 16 people and operates in a 50,000-square-feet that houses offices, a showroom, a warehouse and a parts department.

Deep roots

In the early 1970s, Mack Henderson worked as a technician for various knitting companies when he came in contact with the Lonati Group, which had developed a state-of-the-art pantyhose production machine and was in search of an agent for this hemisphere. Thus, Henderson Machinery Co. was born, performing well for many years before the industry began to decline, Jones said.

In 1989, Irvin joined his father-in-law's company as an hourly employee who handled various tasks, including truck deliveries. Jones, fresh out of UNC Charlotte with an electrical engineering degree, came aboard to handle electronics in 1995.

Tragedy struck the business in 1999 when Henderson was diagnosed with cancer and died not longer afterward. But he left a big legacy in the industry and with his company, Irvin said.

"He was an extremely diligent, loyal and hardworking individual who built a successful company that is recognized as a worldwide supplier of new and used textile equipment and supplies," he said.

As a young employee learning the ropes, Jones added that gaining experience under Henderson was invaluable.

"He was tough and he had high expectations, but he wasn't unreasonable," Jones said. "He was fair but direct. And if he gave you a pat on the back, it really meant something – you knew you had earned it. It was genuine. He was honest and, and I think that's how he built his relationships with customers. The customers knew that not only were they buying a product and that Lonati was going to stand behind it, they knew that Mack Henderson was going stand behind it, too. So his reputation meant as much as the Lonati name on the machine."

Upon Henderson's passing, Irvin moved up from vice president to president, a role in which he remains to this day. Company veteran Earl Russell, general manager at the time, was "excellent" technically, so with his technical skills and Irvin's business savvy as well as a solid team, the company "chugged along" for several more years as the U.S. textile industry began to dwindle, Jones said.

Diversifying, expanding

Henderson Machinery represented a handful of companies besides Lonati in the knitting sector in the early 2000s and gradually began to get out of its comfort zone by forming partnerships with other types of suppliers, Jones noted. As it began expanding over the next decade or so, the company was in need of someone with diverse expertise to help with the business, he added.

Irvin and Jones had met Burke around 2012 or 2013 while he was working at a sweater factory that Henderson Machinery was selling a knitting machine to in Durham, N.C., Burke recalled. Burke, a graduate of N.C. State's College of Textiles with a degree in fashion textile

management and a concentration in product development, impressed the Henderson duo with his technical knowledge and expertise, particularly on the apparel side of the business, Jones said. But a potential job change was not discussed at the time. In addition to his full-time day job at the sweater producer, Burke worked after hours in Greensboro to help start up a toboggan factory for about several months, he said.

When Henderson Machinery added a new partner in 2016, Italy-based IMA for cutting and spreading systems, Irvin began to earnestly seek a team member to help support this business and others. Burke quickly came to mind, so he asked him if he would like to talk with him about a job. Burke joined the company shortly thereafter.

It didn't take long for Burke to become a valuable asset of the team, Irvin said. Not only is he heavily involved in IMA support, but he has jumped in to buoy other products, as well, Jones added.

"His apparel background has really helped us on some of those new products," Jones said, including specialty twisters and quality systems supplied by Turkey-based Agteks.

Added Burke: "With my general understanding of the whole yarn process from my flatbed sweater knitting background, that has helped us on the yarn-twisting side, too, a business that has been very successful for us."

Expanding its business and portfolio over the years presented a huge learning curve and new challenges for the company, Jones added.

"And we are still learning," he said. "The biggest transition for us besides adding new product lines is supporting these products and customers. When we had pantyhose machines and nothing else, we knew every customer out there. There wasn't anybody who made pantyhose that didn't know us and we didn't know them. And so the question with the new business became, how often do you need to see these folks? Is it once a month? Once a week?

"And another challenge for us is, for the first time over the last five or six years, we are learning how to do marketing, and we've never had to look for new customers, really," he continued. "So we're going to tradeshows and are involved in organizations in order to meet new people, learn new processes and see how things are done so we can expand our territory."

Evolving to meet customer, consumer needs

As fashion trends, technology and manufacturing processes have continued to change, Henderson Machinery and its partners have helped drive an evolution in products and processes, Irvin said. Plus, the labor shortage, electronic advancements, regulations and labor costs and consumer preferences for customization and turnaround are factors as well, he added.

"Automation and electronic advancements are key in reducing the cost of production and to offset the lack of available labor in the textile industry," he said. "Producers need to continue to streamline processes and invest in new technology and automation to provide the items at a competitive price. Many consumers are now understanding the benefits of quality and are willing to pay a premium for the items and services."

“What we're definitely seeing in the U.S. is smaller runs, and a lot of it is higher-priced items requiring better technology and resulting in better quality,” Burke added.

Technological upgrades to meet new demands are prevalent among its partners, including a fairly new one for Henderson, Macpi out of Italy for pressing and bonding equipment, Burke said. That company has been making pressing, steaming and pressing equipment for the apparel and shoe knitwear industry for more than 60 years and now produces sew-free bonding equipment. The benefit is that, instead of being stitched, seams are taped or glued with semiautomated equipment, which helps offset the lack of sewing machine operators, he said. And bonding is especially beneficial in athletic and performance wear arenas because it eliminates abrasion points and improves this type of apparel by cutting down on drag as a swimmer cuts through water or wind as a bicyclist races, for instance, he added.

Macpi and Autotex for automation processes and machines also help solve a problem with no-show socks that are known to slide off the heel and onto the foot, Jones said. Each company has developed a method to apply a hypoallergenic tape from Henderson vendor WithME (Faitplast) to the inside of the back heel to hold it in place without the bulkiness of some of the tabs that are in the marketplace. That same technology is used in the compression hosiery for thigh-highs, medical sleeves, bras and belly bands for pregnant women to eliminate the need for silicone dots that are not environmentally friendly and sometimes causes allergic reactions.

“The Macpi machine applies the tape in a cylinder form,” Burke said. “So you're eliminating the cutting of elastic, sewing it into a loop form and then sewing it onto the stocking or sleeve. It comes out of the knitting machine like that and you’re done. A lot of people are buying into this because it eliminates some steps, even though the one step that it does take looks a little longer than the traditional method.”

Another partner, Agteks, is constantly developing new products, and one that has been particularly successful is a yarn detection defect sensor, Burke said.

“Companies are seeing an immediate payback because you eliminate the manual audit in checking,” he said. “So with this and various twisting products from Agteks, we have gotten into some yarn extrusion companies as a result, which is something that we have never been involved with.”

“Sean has done a good job promoting this,” Jones said. “They're using this (defect system) straight from extrusion. Before, it might go way downstream before they know they have a defect, and they’ve produced millions of pounds of yarn that's just trash. So now, coming straight out of extrusion, we can put this system on there and, although it won’t stop an extrusion machine, you know there is a problem early on so you can go work on it and get it back into spec and into tolerance before you have all this waste. The payback on this system is really quick.”

In addition, Agteks’ twister can perform the same functions as open-end twisters, two-for-one twisters and ring twisters. It also has a covering capability to add in the mix, Jones said. Yarns can be twisted that appear to be covered, depending on the denier range and such, he added.

“A lot of the twisters in the market only twist two ends or three ends,” he said. “We can twist up to eight ends and we can actually twist more than that, but the creel comes from the factory built for eight ends. So that versatility fits in with where the market has been trending as manufacturers want proprietary yarn or proprietary colors. So instead of having to buy a 500-

pound minimum when you only need 40 or 50 pounds of this yarn, they can blend their own colors and make this heather yarn for a logo, run it and they're done, for instance. They didn't invest anything else in inventory, so that's where you see your first payback."

This versatility, along with the ability to twist and cover any types of materials including carbon fiber, aramid yarns and fiberglass, has extended Henderson's customer base and final application abilities.

In addition, Henderson partner Santoni has developed a model HT 50 seamless knitting machine and a Santoni X knitting machine, the latter of which is an intarsia machine for knitted shoe uppers. Knitted shoe uppers appear to be more than a trend as they are becoming the standard not only in sports, but in fashion because of their increasingly technical characteristics thanks to cutting-edge and eco-friendly yarns, lightness and optimization of the production processes.

Marketing & networking

With its partners, Henderson Machinery attends tradeshows such as the quadrennial ITMA in Europe and Techtextil North America every year. It also is an active, longstanding member of SEAMS, which has served as the Association and Voice for the U.S. sewn products industry for more than 50 years. Its more than 200 member companies include brands and retailers, cut-and-sew manufacturers, textile, yarn and fiber producers, as well as technology suppliers. Jones serves on SEAMS' board of directors, and Burke spoke on its Millennial panel at its Fall Networking Conference last year.

"SEAMS has been a great organization to be a part of," Jones said. "We first joined for the cut-and-sew side, but it's turned out to be good for us in other ways with some of the other products that we represent. We are interested in domestic business, and one thing we like about SEAMS is they are promoting the North American market, and that's our business. That's who we are.

"Those relationships we have built through SEAMS have expanded our opportunities," he continued. "You can't just go to these conferences and say, 'what were my sales from that?' But you can measure the growth of your network, which may not equal sales today, but may someday. And, either way, you've made some strong connections that can be mutually beneficial."

Added Burke: "You can go to a SEAMS event and interact with a large group of people from different companies. It's really difficult to do that anywhere else, and the amount of time, energy and money you would spend to travel to see all these people individually would be high."

For Henderson Machinery, Burke has also been instrumental in helping on the marketing side through social media, Jones said. He records short videos of its machines and employees "in action," posts them on YouTube and shares them on LinkedIn.

"That has been a pretty effective tool for us, and we're not making a sales pitch on those posts," Burke said. "We include our technicians in the posts, which makes it more personal by putting a face to the name or a face to an email that someone may be communicating with."

While Irvin, Jones and Burke are the “face” of Henderson Machinery at tradeshows and conferences, its other employees also represent the company to customers and partners and are the backbone of the business, Irvin said.

“Henderson is proud of the employee base, as this is the core to a successful business,” he said. “Most employees are long term and this speaks to the loyalty and personal relationships at the company. Henderson Machinery values each employee and their efforts to supply efficient and timely responses to every customer request.”

Looking ahead

Going forward, Henderson Machinery will continue to plumb for new partners, customers and markets as technology continues to improve and trends change, Irvin said.

“We are always researching different areas for growth potential,” he said. “Core products are still a part of our business but we will continue to investigate new technologies and related industries for possible opportunities. And we will continue to explore every area for the next growth potential as well as continuing to provide support for existing suppliers and customers.”