

MILLENNIAL CORNER:

Younger generation helping drive textile industry resurgence

Editor's note: SEAMS has introduced a new feature on the newsletter, Millennial Corner. This blog gives the younger generation – who in the near future will serve in leadership positions and guide the direction of the association – a larger voice and platform NOW and will help them engage more the entire SEAMS' membership while busting stereotypes.

By Ryan Smith
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In 2014, I was managing a restaurant franchise just outside of Orlando, Fla. My father calls and says “son, I could really use some help at Printcraft.” At this point, I had been employed in the restaurant industry for nine years, seven of which had been in a management capacity. Those of you who have worked in this field can attest to just how taxing a vocation this can be. I had recently found myself looking for way out, so when this opportunity presented itself, I thought “what better way than to be able to help out with the family business?”

As you all well know, the '90s and 2000s saw an unprecedented erosion of textiles manufacturing in the U.S. However, in recent years, there has been a tremendous resurgence in drive among industry professionals to revitalize the American textiles supply chain, resulting in great strides towards establishing new domestic production. I cannot help but attribute this largely to the new class of Millennials entering the workforce, many of whom witnessed the outsourcing of their parents' jobs and lived through the subsequent fallout.

To us, this goal is a combination of self-preservation for the future, and retribution for the past. We have something to prove to the world: There was reason the U.S. dominated this industry for more than 300 years, and we will show them why they should not have forgotten.

The manufacturing of textiles in the U.S. originates back to the Homespun movement in response to the Townshend acts. As a result of this act, women boycotted British products and undertook the task of utilizing their own resources to produce homespun clothing in their homes, later used in the revolutionary war. Textiles production is at the heart of American heritage and its culture of independence.

Growing up in the heart of textile manufacturing in North Carolina, even at a young age, it became apparent we were losing the battle to foreign markets. Friends and family were displaced as cheaper labor and the availability of materials overseas prevailed, which began to eliminate jobs from our local communities. Domestic manufacturing collapsed and unemployment rose quickly, resulting in a massive, highly-skilled labor force with cumulative acumen from generations being displaced from gainful employment opportunities. The world's most advanced textiles manufacturing labor force was now, seemingly overnight, left without an outlet for its skills.

In 1989 My father, Marvin Smith, took over Printcraft Company Inc. in Lexington, N.C. He was tasked with rescuing Printcraft from the harrows of insolvency, and turning it back into a profitable printing services provider for the textile and furniture industries. Before this venture, Marvin was working in agriculture for a major grain distributor. His father-in-law, who was operating the sister company in Shelby, N.C., had finally talked him into taking on the task. At

the same time, the grain distributor was looking to relocate Marvin to a metropolis in the Northeast or Midwest. He felt that such a relocation was not in the best interest of our family; therefore, he left everything he's ever known to take over a failing company in an industry completely unfamiliar to him.

Marvin made this sacrifice to give our family the best life possible and to help the hard-working, skilled professionals in an industry threatened by foreign takeover. The struggle was real but the sacrifice and heartache involved with this venture was well worth the pain. Most of our employees, then and now, are skilled professionals from the textile and furniture industries who had to reinvent themselves only because their positions no longer existed in those markets.

Today, Printcraft Company has expanded its footprint to include manufacturing centers in other states, Central America and Asia, in order to cater to the same companies that once thrived in this area but had relocated overseas chasing lower costs of production. Still to this day, Printcraft remains headquartered in Lexington, N.C., where it was established in 1930. Lexington continues to be our highest-capacity facility, containing more unique processes under one roof than our other facilities combined.

We may have foreign production facilities but we are different than most, all are owned by Printcraft 100 percent (no joint ventures) and we sell to the regions in which our facilities are located. We actually export more out of our North Carolina facility than we import from our two foreign facilities combined. I say this for one reason: to illustrate that we can get domestically produced goods to our domestic customers' loading docks cheaper than we can our own goods produced overseas. In short: It can be done!

The goal is to keep people working in our community and to try to keep an industry alive in the U.S. that faces the same pattern of outsourcing that affected furniture and textiles manufacturing. Also, to continue to grow an amazing company that my father rebuilt and to employ tradesmen and tradeswomen in an industry they so passionately want to revive.

I never thought I would be making a career in the printing industry, and especially working for Printcraft. I was ignorant to the greater, bigger picture because it is more than printing. We supply the labels and tags necessary for the textile industry to brand themselves and work closely with government officials to supply the correct, legally mandated disclosure labeling for home fashions, furniture and apparel. The truth is, I love my job and I love being a part of this industry.

The support from all parties within SEAMS is second to none. The resources, networking opportunities and passion for a U.S.-based textile supply chain is why the organization exists. It's what our industry is all about, and one of the major reasons I have hope for U.S. manufacturing.

The future is in our hands. We can revive this industry so that future generations have the pleasure of being a part of what our founders built. We may never domestically produce the lowest-cost textile products again, but we all share a commitment to producing the best. This creates such a value proposition for U.S.-manufactured textiles that, although they may not be the cheapest, you will soon find that the products made right here at home, in your community, by you and your neighbors, are the most cost-effective on the planet.