



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

## **‘Proud to make a difference’**

*Unionwear, Prime Medical, Brother International pitching in to do good in the world*

By Devin Steele

Here, in SEAMS’ continuing series of stories highlighting some of our members who are rallying around the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) shortage, we are featuring three companies – Unionwear, Prime Medical and Brother International Corp. – who have answered the call.

As the go-to resource for the sewn products industry, we appreciate those members who are stepping up to address the critical need for these products during the COVID-19 pandemic. As you well know, our industry plays a vital role in the health, safety and well-being of our citizens, and we’re excited to call out these astounding efforts. We are proud of you and excited to tout these incredible members:

### **Unionwear**

Unionwear, a Newark, N.J.-based supplier of made in the USA hats, bags and binders for the promotional, fashion and uniform markets, shifted its operations to produce face shields and isolation gowns to protect healthcare employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the face shields, the company recognized that it could combine elements of its three product lines – clear vinyl from portfolios, sweatbands from baseball caps and foam from backpack straps, according to company founder and President Mitch Cahn. “But gowns were an entirely new animal for us,” he said.

The company aims to produce 10,000 face shields and 3,000 isolation gowns each day, he added.

Cahn said that Unionwear knew nothing about FDA requirements for these items, and that setting up new production lines meant it needed to fast track all the Kaizen/Lean Manufacturing steps that took it years to perfect in its existing lines.

“The main focus was working backwards from demand,” Cahn said. “What would it take to get 50,000 units on a truck each week? Working backwards meant we had clarity on what bottlenecks/learning curve issues/known unknowns would need to be addressed.”

Unionwear currently is working at about 30 percent capacity, he pointed out, as New Jersey is a hot spot for coronavirus (85,301 cases, 4,202 deaths as of April 20), so many employees are afraid to go to work, he said. The company, typically a two-shift operation, is running one shift because of curfews, he added.

As for gaps that could help improve the company’s manufacturing capabilities, Cahn said more employees coming back to work would help tremendously, as well as the ability to procure more supply such as waterproof fabric, elastic and clear plastic, where shortages exist.



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The company engaged with its labor union, an affiliate of the hospital workers union in New York City, which steered Unionwear in the right direction regarding what products to manufacture, Cahn noted.

Face shields and isolation gowns it is producing are primarily going to hospitals in New Jersey and New York, and to a lesser extent nursing homes, municipal employees such as firefighters, police officers and sanitation workers and private practices, he said.

“Employees are proud to make a difference (with new products) – we typically make hats and bags, rarely considered ‘essential,’” Cahn said. “I know that if we had a chance to help end the war on coronavirus and we punted, I couldn’t live with myself.”

Asked to look longer term, Cahn said, “We need a Berry Amendment for medical textiles to keep this from ever happening again!”

### **Prime Medical**

Prime Medical, based in Largo, Fla., quickly recognized a need for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as the coronavirus pandemic was rapidly spreading around the world, according to Wayne Wilson, founder and executive vice president of Product Development and Manufacturing.

So the company, the exclusive manufacturer of Clorox Healthcare™ Privacy Curtains and CloroxPro™ Scrubs and Lab Coats, pivoted its operations to produce CDC-compliant face masks.

“We quickly started planning and making samples for approval,” Wilson said. “We set up our supply line and started manufacturing with our domestic manufacturer in Miami.”

Face mask production isn’t completely a new concept for Wilson, he pointed out.

“I developed a face mask a few years back, but they have been sitting on the back burner,” he said. “It didn’t take much for me to get this into production. I did source it domestically in a few places but the initial cost was too high. Our margins are very tight and we did this for the purpose of getting the product out there quicker. It’s a numbers game. This is a huge boost for our company’s bottom line. And we have very reliable suppliers.”

The company continues to make medical scrubs, lab coats and privacy curtains under license for the Clorox brand, but its current focus is on masks, Wilson said. It is promoting its own brand, Prime Medical, in this venture, he added.

The firm has retained its small staff during the crisis, but employees are now wearing several hats to support the effort, Wilson said.

“They come to work every day energized,” he said. “They believe in what we are doing and what our mission is – do good in the world. We know we’re making a difference and in some cases, saving lives.”

Prime Medical is producing 10,000 face masks a week and is trying to work up to 100,000 a week, or as needed, Wilson reported. “I have unlimited production capacity with a NAFTA manufacturer, if



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needed," he said. Face masks are being sent to all levels of healthcare, municipalities, government and corporations, he noted.

Prime Medical typically runs a 40-hour workweek, but staff has been answering calls after hours and on weekends, and Wilson is coming in every day seven days a week during the pandemic, he said.

"Although this is a boost for our business, it does sadden me that lives are being lost," Wilson said.

### **Brother International Corp.**

As several apparel companies are now heeding the call to manufacture face masks and other protective clothing to help stop the spread of COVID-19, Brother International Corporation is joining in this fight by donating state-of-the-art industrial sewing machines to accelerate the production of masks and address the shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Brother's "Powering the Mask Making" Initiative began when the company saw a post on LinkedIn from Brooks Brothers regarding factories reopening and the need to ramp up operations in order to produce PPE. Knowing that Brother's industrial sewing machines would help increase the capacity to meet the growing demand, the Industrial Products Division at Brother put their heads together and developed a program in order to put their machines to work, where they were most needed. Brother reached an agreement with Brooks Brothers to supply Brother S7250A-403 single-needle lockstitch industrial sewing machines free of charge in order to support their efforts.

Through additional research, Brother learned of a coalition of iconic American apparel brands and textile companies responding to the urgent call from the White House to fast track the manufacturing of face masks. Los Angeles Apparel, Beverly Knits, Inc. and SanMar are part of that coalition and have now also received Brother industrial sewing machines free of charge as a donation in support of their efforts to manufacture much-needed personal protective equipment.

"Brother remains committed to aiding our communities during these challenging times," said Don Cummins, president, Brother International Corporation USA, Bridgewater, N.J. "Given the severe and growing shortage of Personal Protective Equipment, Brother is proud to donate our products to support these stalwart manufacturers with their efforts in making masks for our frontline workers."

Brother said it continues to have conversations with other companies that are part of the coalition, as well as others that are aiding in the production of PPE approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.