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‘An awakening to the nation’

Importance of textile industry shines bright during pandemic

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 – Precision Fabrics Group, Aurora Specialty Textiles Group and Gehring Tricot 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:

Precision Fabrics Group

Precision Fabrics Group of Greensboro, N.C., has made protective fabrics for years, so it did not need to transition to support the Personal Protective Products (PPE) effort, according to Terry Montgomery, chief technology officer and vice president of business development.

Precision Fabrics Group produces and supplies barrier fabrics used in medical gowns (AAMI Level I, II, III, and IV) and face mask components, and has remained fully staffed throughout the pandemic crisis, he said.

“Our existing healthcare customers remain, plus new customers have come forth seeking domestic sources for healthcare textiles,” Montgomery said.

Precision’s products predominately go to cut-and-sew providers and distributors in the healthcare and protective apparel industries. However, some companies from the consumer apparel industry – who are in the process of converting their production to meet the current COVID-19 needs – have contacted the company in search of medical textile materials, he noted.

“Everyone wants to use their manufacturing assets and distribution to help protect workers in the healthcare industry and those affected by COVID-19,” Montgomery said. “In many cases, they are intent on supplying masks and gowns for healthcare entities in their own state.”

In most areas, Precision is running a three-shift manufacturing operation, but the current throughput is indeed higher than “normal” times, particularly in the medical business, he said. He added that the company is fortunate to have excellent raw material suppliers that have been able to ramp up supply in most all cases.

“Aside from continuing to keep our associates safe and supporting the healthcare system during the crisis, our focus remains on strengthening Precision Fabrics for the long term,” he said.



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He added: "Like everyone involved in this critical effort, we are very gratified to be in a position to supply many of the fabrics for which there is an immediate need."

Aurora Specialty Textiles Group, Inc.

Aurora Specialty Textiles Group, Inc., a 137-year-old Yorkville, Ill.-based company that bleaches, finishes, coats and dyes woven, nonwovens and knit fabrics, is now supplying materials to be used in the production of cloth face masks, nonwoven antimicrobial wipes and treated fabrics to produce Level 1 and Level 2 medical gowns amid the COVID-19 crisis.

Fabrics for face masks and medical gowns have not been standard products for Aurora, but because the company has capabilities to coat and finish a range of fabrics, it was well equipped to quickly pivot to produce fabric for these applications, according to President Marcia Ayala. Aurora also has the capability to finish nonwovens, so the product to be used for wipes was also a good fit, she added.

"The biggest shift was quickly learning the different levels of medical gowns and PPE and understanding how our fabrics and fabric treatments can be utilized to produce these products," Ayala said. "Our R&D staff is knowledgeable in the chemistries needed to achieve Level 1 and Level 2 medical gown status."

Aurora has been designated an Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce due to products it makes for Homeland Security and medical applications. As such, as it continues to run its manufacturing facility. The company has had several customers reach out to produce fabric for masks and gowns.

"We have been able to quickly respond to their requests," Ayala said.

Preparing fabrics to be used in applications such as face masks, wipes and medical gowns align well with Aurora's core competencies. However, with any new product, attention to detail and cooperation among internal departments, as well as working closely with our customer and/or industry partner, are needed. Aurora utilizes a Stage Gate Process to include various disciplines within the organization to review the feasibility of the equipment, chemistry and process so it can properly launch products in a quick time frame. Operators on the floor are engaged and understand the sense of urgency with these products, she added.

The company has a range of fabric suppliers. However, nonwoven fabrics traditionally used in the PPE market have been challenging to secure due to the current high demand. Aurora also does toll coating/finishing, so it is partnering with customers to secure fabric and produce the desired finished fabric.

"Aurora employees are very excited to have an opportunity to launch new products to fight the virus," she said. "The sense of urgency is phenomenal. Employees at every level, within every department are engaged in making a product that will help make our communities safer. I heard one employee say, 'It feels good to have the capabilities to quickly create products that will fight COVID-19.' "



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Ayala added: “We are proud that we can contribute to protecting our healthcare workers and the public against COVID-19, and meet our customers' needs in a time of crisis.”

Gehring Tricot Corporation

To combat the PPE shortage during the COVID-19 crisis, Gehring Tricot Corporation, a Dolgeville, N.Y.-based textile manufacturer founded in 1946, is making and supplying fabrics for medical masks, non-medical masks, hospital gowns, hospital curtains, medical bandages and other medical supplies.

The company also is supplying a good bit of product to the military and national defense in ballistics, firefighting apparel, tactical vests, military tent screening and other products that used in first responders' safety materials.

Gehring Tricot is supplying a diverse range of textiles constructions to facilitate the non-certified PPE market through all types of knit and nonwoven fabrics. It provides full-width goods to its existing and newly kindled partnerships that are in need of quick-turn domestic resources.

The company was making product for most of those markets already, including the medical industry, according to Skip Gehring, president & CEO. But it has needed to increase production of some products, as well R&D for medical needs, added Gary Farquhar, vice president of manufacturing.

“We pivoted on a couple of things, mainly hospital gowns and the more sophisticated medical masks,” Gehring said.

Added Bill Christmann, vice president of sales: “We are providing largely existing products being adapted to the necessary crisis. People are improvising – battle conditions – but we are working on things that will work on a long-term domestic level. Simultaneously, this has opened the need for Gehring Tricot Corp. as a preeminent domestic development partner, to work on projects that will satisfy these needs long after the current crisis is over.”

Drilling down, Gehring pointed out that, on the medical side, in order to be able to make masks, the company had to readjust the materials in terms of getting the filtrations up to where they needed to be, and likewise the antimicrobial finishes.

“We had to modify existing fabrics to meet the more stringent requirements, and hospital gowns are the same way – getting the fabrics to conform to all of the requirements,” he said. “So, they were existing fabrics that were just modified primarily in the finishing.

“The other part of the pivoting is that we are now physically making masks – non-medical masks – that we have distributed for free to all employees in our factories and their families,” he continued. “And, we are in the process of donating 10,000 of them to people in the respective towns where our factories are (in St. Johnsville, N.Y., and Dolgeville, N.Y.), which will start this week.”

The biggest part of the learning curve was readjusting placement in the factories to adhere to social distancing, with non-essential people working from home, and getting them set up with computers and other necessary equipment they need to do so, according to Gehring.



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The company started a COVID-19 Task Force to help address all of the essential needs for all of its employees, he noted. That Task Force talks each day relative to each of the individual and corporate circumstances of what the company has to do in terms of taking care of people, he added.

“We haven’t had to pivot much going from non-essential to essential because what this circumstance illustrated is that our success is our commitment to diversity,” Christmann said. “We have always been supplying essentials markets, so our only pivot was, ‘How do we go from supplying other essential markets to assisting in these specialized essential markets?’ ”

The learning curve from Farquhar’s perspective has been the certification of new and existing products, he said.

“We’ve learned about many of the testing requirements that many of the products have to go through,” he said. “In the past, we’ve made the components of many of the products, but never got into testing requirements of the products, which we are now learning.”

Gehring Tricot has remained fully staffed, with about 10 percent of employees working from home that are considered to be non-essential, doing corporate paperwork and such, Gehring said. As far as the factories, staff employees who work in manufacturing were sent home to work from there as non-essential. All manufacturing employees are rotating so that people can still be isolated, he added.

Herkimer Industries, based in the New York town of the same name, is cutting and sewing the masks for Gehring Tricot and making prototypes of hospital gowns. Other partners include Professional Products, which has been buying materials for their medical masks and is working with Gehring on hospital gowns. Gehring also has been supplying Crye Precision, LLC with material for masks at reduced prices to help out, as well as Beyond Clothing and Precept.

Each of these partners is specifically dealing with PPE efforts now, shifting from their original products, Gehring said.

“We work very closely with all of our existing partnerships,” Christmann said. “Some of our ancillary partners who might have focused on imports have shifted their focus to us as a domestic provider. I’m working very closely with friends in the industry, trying to help each other. There’s just a continued camaraderie of the relationships that we’ve always had with our peers of industry and the trade associations.”

To meet demand during the crisis, Gehring Tricot is running 24 hours a day, five days a week.

“We had cut back on overtime,” Gehring said. “We normally would run six to six-and-a-half days, but in order to help with the social distancing and giving people a break and time at home, we have cut it back to five days with three shifts.”

As far as areas where improvement could be seen, he noted that being able to supply some of the products that are categorized as non-essential would be a big boost.

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“We are still paying 100 percent of our employees running at 70 percent capacity,” Gehring said. “If we were able to run non-essential, that would really help us.”

He added that there has been a slowdown in supply. “We have been pivoting, using existing raw materials in-house to replace what we’re not able to get our hands on,” he said. “It primarily has been a slowdown, not a non-existence of raw materials – yarn and chemicals.”

Christmann added that one of the challenges is being an “essential supplier supplying essential companies,” but to a certain degree, the company is reliant on its suppliers.

“We’re only as good as the reliability of our supply channels – and our essential customers maintaining their customer base so that our efforts are constantly brought to fruition,” he said.

The company is hitting its goals in terms of supplying all of the essential and critical items that it supplies, Gehring said. “Right now, there really isn’t any difficulties hitting our goals – we’re shipping what needs to be shipped – and that’s primarily because of all the people that are committed to what we’re doing. Thank God for the people that we have because they are doing what needs to be done.”

Added Farquhar: “Our goal is to produce as much fabric as we can with the highest level of efficiency possible without sacrificing quality.”

Employees are extremely proud to be pitching in to the effort, Gehring noted.

“As soon as the coronavirus became a pandemic, we were immediately notified by about 70 percent of our customers that they were essential,” he said. “So right now, about 70 percent of our mill is operating because they are essential for either military, medical, national defense or first responders. We’ve been a supplier to all of them in our normal business operations, so all of our employees realize they are unsung heroes because of what they’re supplying.

“We’re not having issues getting people to come to work, which tells you that they realize what they are providing is critical to our national security,” he continued. “They are really proud of what they’re doing. There have been some fears here and there, but those are normal and to be expected.”

Christmann concurred: “I have a phrase that I refer to, that ‘Anyone can man the helm when the seas are calm.’ I think that a lot of people in our company are taking pride in an opportunity at such an international level. We are able to see how integral Gehring Tricot Corp. is to the entire world’s infrastructure in our way.”

“I think they’re thankful to still be working,” added Farquhar. “They’re a lot like our product line – diverse and dependable; they’re the best of the best and, once again, they’ve gone above and beyond to get the job done and support the customers.”

Gehring, Christmann and Farquhar were also asked how it makes them, as leaders, feel to be involved in such an important endeavor.

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“The important part of it all is that, fortunately, 15 years ago, we had started to change the makeup of the company from providing commodities to providing real technical end-use fabrics,” Gehring said. “And, fortunately, that was done, allowing us to stay open [during that time]. After this is all said and done, we are still going to be a viable company providing jobs to all those people who need it for their families. Being in small towns, we are absolutely critical for each of these towns’ survival. The people in these towns are extremely good, kind people, and it feels very good – and not just for me, but other officers in the company feel the same way. It is an opportunity to give back to the towns that have kept us in business.”

Christmann added that the feeling is “incredible,” validating a commitment to an industry that involves an enormity of work and sacrifice. “It almost makes it pale in comparison to what you’re providing. This validates a life commitment to such an integral industry that has seen such loss, and I think now it will be an awakening to the nation on the importance of the textile industry. It’s a testament to the textile industry as a whole that everyone has come together and is working so well together. It proves the American passion to come together.”

Farquhar added: “We’re proud to be able to step up and participate in a time of need. We’re not only helping the essentials, but the local community during this time. I’m extremely proud of how the company has handled itself during this crisis. Everyone has stepped up and done something that they normally would not have to do. Sacrifices have been made without complaints, and employees continue to work with pride. Without the employees, none of this is possible.”

Gehring also thanked all of the company’s employees in its respective towns – Tweave (Fall River, Mass.), Belmont Mills (St. Johnsville, N.Y.) and Tricot (Dolgeville, N.Y.) – who have been committed to the cause. “None of this happens if it wasn’t for all of the employees believing in what we are doing,” he said.