



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

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Working with association coalition, SEAMS and its members prove value during crisis

By Devin Steele

As is being well documented, SEAMS and many of its members stepped into high gear at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when the urgent call for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) suddenly began to ring loud throughout the country in early March.

As coronavirus numbers were rising and threatening to overrun hospitals, numerous healthcare facilities, nursing homes, first responders and the general public were pleading for such items as face masks, gowns and other such protective equipment. But with PPE mostly being imported from China, the federal government found itself flatfooted trying to respond to this challenge.

SEAMS' invaluable piece of the puzzle was realized early on as three textile/nonwovens associations, responding to a pressing request from the U.S. government, began discussions to address this shortage.

The Washington, D.C.-based National Council of Textile Organizations (NCTO), the industry's major lobbying group, engaged SEAMS in talks it had initiated with the Industrial Fabrics Association International (IFAI) and INDA, the Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry as the need for cut-and-sew services and others provided by SEAMS' members was deemed crucial to fulfill supply chain needs.

"Our industry associations were getting calls from all over the country – from governors, mayors, state legislators, advocacy organizations, healthcare organizations and others – anyone in desperate need of PPE," said Kim Glas, President & CEO of the NCTO. "I know (SEAMS' Executive Director) Will Duncan was getting those calls across various states and localities, too, so we decided very quickly that we needed to bring the sectors together to figure out how to maximize the domestic production chain in a short period of time."

With such diverse requests coming in from a variety of entities, the hastily cobbled-together coalition of industry associations recognized that no resource database existed for domestic PPE, Glas added. So the NCTO sent a survey to assess these capabilities, and received more than 1,000 responses within 24 hours, she noted.

"We started getting calls from everybody under the sun, from a retired school teacher with a sewing machine and a sister with the same thing who wanted to help, to large companies that also wanted to help but weren't sure how to navigate the waters," Duncan said. "At the same time, we were receiving calls from doctors' offices, hospitals, buyer groups, all in need of PPE products in large quantities, with



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individual requests for something like 12 million masks. So we were acting as a conduit to put supply chains together that had never existed before by putting the hospitals and buyer groups in contact with fabric mills, and put the fabric mills in touch with cut-and-sew companies.

“The difficult part of it was they all wanted finished goods,” he added. “They didn’t want to have to piece together supply chains. So we reached out to our members to find out what their capabilities were, especially if they were thinking about pivoting into PPE.”

Like the NCTO, SEAMS surveyed its members and shared its results with the coalition, which helped draw a more complete picture of capacity in the U.S., Duncan said.

“SEAMS’ role at the start was serving as a facilitator for information that we were receiving,” he said. “We were seeing a big need for patterns, so we tried to capture and put together as many patterns as we could.”

As a result, SEAMS was able to swiftly post a [PPE Pattern Resource Hub](#) on its website to assist those in need. SEAMS, through its members, also was able to help put those supply chains together, he added. And several of those members were asked to become part of a separate alliance of companies, led by Hanes and Parkdale, to produce PPE for the government.

Likewise, the IFAI – a partner group with SEAMS – created a [COVID-19 Resource Center](#) that provides useful information such as a supplier directory, government and agency information, financial information and a pattern and resources list that links to SEAMS’ PPE Pattern Resource Hub.

“When each of our association members needed help, insight and guidance, we were able to pool our resources and work together almost seamlessly on their behalf,” said Steve Schiffman, President & CEO of IFAI. “It is something that I hope can and should continue. One of the big issues early on was navigation of the processes to help bring PPE to those in need. Government agencies were trying, but were not able to communicate effectively. And regulations got in the way of being able to meet needs in the midst of a dire situation. Members were looking for answers and found they were hard to come by.”

And similarly, the NCTO posted a frequently updated [COVID-19 Response Resources & Information](#) page.

A number of queries came in from companies seeking Berry-compliant products, many of which SEAMS’ members produce, Glas pointed out.

“They were looking for wovens and nonwovens, which span the industry looking for gowns and surgical masks,” she said. “Through this whole process, since we were working together, putting together databases and triaging as inquiries were coming in from all over the country, from the administration or from Capitol Hill, it helped focus our efforts around getting information out to our collective memberships to take advantage of opportunities to supply the U.S. government and DLA (Defense Logistics Agency, which is now in charge of the federal contracting process for PPE).



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“We just had a solicitation close on June 1st where the U.S. government was seeking to purchase 70 million gowns in a 90-day period,” she continued. “And that’s just to supply FEMA, for distribution to hospitals. The government likely will be making more major purchases moving forward to help fulfill the strategic national stockpile that has been depleted as a result of COVID-19.”

Along with fabric supply and cut-and-sew services, nonwovens is a critical ingredient in some PPE products, of course, so INDA – an NCTO member – was enlisted at the early stages.

“This is a very constructive collaboration, and Kim has been the key to that, given her long working relationship with Dr. Peter Navarro (assistant to the president and director of trade and manufacturing policy),” said Dave Rousse, President of INDA. “We formed a coalition of like-minded trade associations to share information and better connect those folks who need PPE with those folks who have it or were interested in making it. And we also have connected those companies who are trying to get into the game of making PPE with the resources and knowledge to do that.”

Organizing a game plan

As the coalition was aligning its resources and organizing a game plan, the number of questions coming in was enormous and “all over the board,” Glas recalled.

“People wanted to know such things as who is making elastics for masks, who can cut and sew, who can finish products, etc.,” Glas said. “It was a call to action for the industry, as the U.S. government was trying to figure out where to go to find out these things. And hospitals were getting so desperate that their procurement officers were just calling manufacturers directly in China, which was over-promising or under-delivering. So a majority of their questions were unresolved.

“Some of those procurement officers were really looking to source closer to home,” she continued. “They lamented, ‘why don’t we have more of a supply chain here? This should never happen.’ ”

Glas added that the associations could not make the kind of impact it wanted to make in a short period of time without working together.

“That takes leadership from everybody, all the industry associations, to figure out what the moment called for and what future moments will be called for as this industry grapples with whatever the issues are,” she said.

According to Rousse, the nonwovens industry was pretty well “tapped out” as far as supply goes, he said. One of the tremendous needs was for medical gowns, he pointed out, especially as those healthcare professionals such as dentists and dermatologists who typically would only wear a lab coat or the something similar were suddenly requesting Levels 1 or 2 gowns when the contagion began to spread, he said.

“Everybody we talked with was running 24/7 and, and all of their tonnage for SMS (spunbond meltblown spunbond) and spunbond was already committed,” Rousse said. “Our members were having to give three or four month lead times to new customers.



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“But for Level 1 or Level 2, you don't need nonwoven material necessarily,” he continued. “The coalition did a heck of a good job getting some of the woven fabrics and apparel manufacturers into the game of making gowns because the apparel guys weren't making anything since not many people were buying clothes. They have all these great machines and they were willing to assist. So I think one of the best things the coalition did was find a way to connect available resources in manufacturing and the apparel area with available materials – the woven materials with the patterns and plans that are necessary to make Level 1 and 2 gowns to meet the surge in demand in the healthcare sector.”

Some nonwovens producers in particular, especially those that cater to the auto industry, were able to take some of their needlepunch assets and make material for those type of gowns, Rouse said.

Another important benefit of being involved in the coalition was having the NCTO work with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to have some requirements relaxed in order to increase expediency, he added. Certain PPE was required to be made in facilities meeting 21 CFR 820 regulations, but that requirement was temporarily waived, he said.

“That enabled a lot more companies to quickly get into the game of making Levels 1 and 2 gowns,” he said, adding that certain requirements for face mask labeling also were waived, provided they didn't falsely claim they were for medical or surgical uses.

One of the major drivers of success was the communication between and within the associations, according to Schiffman.

“Given the speed in which these connections were made, I think associations worked hard to try and advocate, streamline and communicate with our members,” he said. “For example: The PPE directory and the speed in which we were able to develop the survey, tabulate the answers and get online and available. This important tool provided a way to identify who made what, where and other capabilities.

“Secondly,” he continued, “members worked to contribute quickly as a way to keep employees working and the lights on. Our collaboration ensured that information was consistent across all associations for our members. Information was scarce and we worked together to connect with Washington and let them know what obstacles were in the way of progress.”

Looking ahead

These associations coming together to work with a common purpose has been a purposeful exercise that has demonstrated positive results – and could be a model for future collaboration, Duncan said. This is particularly important as the industry works with governments, healthcare systems and others to ensure such a PPE shortage crisis doesn't occur in America ever again, he added.

Schiffman agreed, adding that he believes the member organizations should look for opportunities to work together on future endeavors when there is NOT a crisis.

“Hopefully, we will create forward-thinking ideas that will benefit our collective members by our collaboration,” he said.



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Rousse also added that he is excited to be a part of the coalition.

“The collaboration among the associations coordinated by Kim and the NCTO is a terrific example of the benefit of associations marshaling the resources of our separate industries for the benefit of all,” he said.

To Glas, this crisis has exposed weaknesses in global trading networks and has given the U.S. sewn products/textiles/apparel/nonwovens industry the opportunity to stand out and tangibly reveal its importance to the country’s safety, health and wellbeing, she said.

“We are in a critical moment right now in elevating our importance in terms of our national security, health and security moving forward,” she said. “So how do we take this moment to use our collective voices across our industry associations to ensure that we actually bring some of these supply chains onshore? So it's an opportunity and a challenge. And I think all of our industry associations are really delighted to have this conversation right now because it's long overdue.

“It’s fantastic that the industry is being recognized from the highest levels of our government and the critical nature and importance of this industry,” she continued. “And we have received real attention from the healthcare industry that is understanding it’s to our detriment to put so many eggs in one basket. I'm hopeful that we don't have short-term memory loss. We should never be in this position again.”

Glas also commended SEAMS in particular for bringing a number of capabilities to the table that the coalition would have lacked otherwise.

“SEAMS members have been extremely nimble in a very dynamic environment wanting to serve the American people and wanting to serve frontline workers,” she said. “I know that NCTO membership is grateful to SEAMS’ members and what they have been contributing in terms of helping and partnering with others in the industry in very short timeframes. They have been an incredible asset in all of this. So we're delighted to partner with SEAMS, as well as INDA and IFAI and others who want to be part of this overall movement and effort.”

She added that conversations should continue between the associations and their members in order to access future opportunities. And she praised SEAMS for its weekly national social media and email campaign highlighting its members who have stepped up to collaborate and produce much-needed PPE during our nation’s time of need. Such a communications effort could be elevated to include more associations and the broader industry in order to expand the messaging reach, she said.

“What we should be looking at now is some joint advocacy work that we could be doing to help onshore these industries long term, hitching on to the great efforts by SEAMS on the Made-in-America PPE movement,” Glas said.