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‘IMMENSELY PROUD’

SEAMS’ members energized to contribute to PPE cause

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 two companies – Apex Mills Corp. and Vapor Apparel – who have heeded the call.

As the go-to resource for the sewn products industry, we appreciate those members who have stepped 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:

Apex Mills

Apex Mills Corp. jumped at the opportunity early on during the pandemic when the world-renowned Cleveland Clinic reached out to the Inwood, N.Y.-based textile manufacturer in search of high-volume, reusable masks for their administrative and non-medical personnel.

The company quickly developed a durable, high-quality mask using a three-ply spacer fabric with a breathable face, soft back and an entanglement of high-filament yarns in the middle for filtration. It added a tightly knit liner fabric for extra protection and comfort.

“It was extremely gratifying to hear that while they sought out masks from multiple sources, ours stood out for the feature-rich value and comfort it offered,” said Jonathan Kurz, president & CEO of Apex. “The feedback was so positive and complimentary that it energized us to expand the mask program to help more companies keep their employees safe, protected and comfortable.”

Both employees and customers alike have continued to praise the mask Apex developed for its comfort and performance, he added. “Everyone is excited to be a part of this solution,” he said.

The general-purpose masks are reusable, washable and finished with a zinc-based, environmentally friendly antimicrobial treatment and moisture management properties. They are constructed to sit off the face to enhance breathability, clarity of speech and comfort. Multiple styles are available and can be customized.



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Apex's PPE approach is to sell to businesses, schools and large organizations, he pointed out. With the requirement in some areas that all people must wear a mask in a public setting, the company is looking to help companies get back to work, he added. Its masks can be customized or dyed a company color, and a logo imprint can be added.

Since launching its Spacer Dome Pro mask, the company has received numerous inquiries from individual consumers looking for the masks.

"With the growing interest we are experiencing, we are looking into the creation of an online retail channel for broader distribution," he said. "Please note, however, our face masks are not medical grade and should not be worn by frontline responders."

Apex Mills specializes in responding to problems that its customers face with engineered textile solutions, Kurz noted.

"We recognized that the current assortment of everyday masks on the market were more the result of companies utilizing any fabrics they had on hand in a very basic design instead of a well-conceived solution to the problems and new reality we are all facing," he said. "We did not have to pivot our problem evaluation approach. It is what we do every day. We needed only bring together the expertise of our textile designers and engineers with that of fabrication studios to design a better-engineered face mask."

The company's size and nimbleness gave it the ability to pivot, which has always been one of its core strengths, he said. In this situation, Apex identified the constructions it could engineer that most effectively addressed the very specific PPE response needed, and "we just started knitting," he said. "The thought process was a simple one; we saw that we could help and quickly pulled together all the resources necessary to do as much as we could."

Because the company was not previously a manufacturer of finished product, it reached out to companies that it presently partners with in various supply chains for support and manufacturing. Additionally, its involvement in various industry trade groups helped communicate its needs to other potential partners, according to Kurz.

"The response we received was tremendous and has led us to this great product," he said. "So many of the members in our industry stepped up in a very big way."

For the most part, Apex has a robust supply chain and can secure the resources it needs, he said. One example of short supply is the elastic needed for the masks, however. As the demand for masks and other PPE products grow, it continues to identify additional partners.

Ultimately, the company expects to deliver hundreds of thousands of masks, Kurz said.

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“We will continue making masks as long as masks are needed,” he said. “We will invest appropriately to secure the supplies and develop the partnerships needed to continue to help during these times. We will also continue to innovate and develop new and more effective mask solutions to the challenges we face.”

While the company has experienced furloughs and layoffs as a result of diminished regular production during the COVID-19 crisis, it is hoping to get all of its team members back to work in the upcoming months, he added. Apex is running 24 hours a day, five and sometimes six days per week. It has been primarily focused on essential products that go to the medical, military and infrastructure markets.

“Unfortunately, due to the shutdown of businesses across so many industries we are operating at significantly less than our normal capacity,” Kurz said.

Kurz said he is “immensely proud” to be part of an industry that has joined forces so quickly to deliver much needed PPE to our country.

“Based on the widespread industry response, we know that our textile manufacturing community is playing an integral role at the front line with our healthcare workers and first responders,” he said. “We hope we can do our part by supplying to the everyday user a well-engineered, easy-to-wear and effective mask.”

As we continue to enter a period of so many unknowns, Kurz said that Apex Mills is striving to anticipate the upcoming challenges that will arise in the many industries it supplies and service and apply its problem-solving approach to address them.

Vapor Apparel

Vapor Apparel, based near Charleston, S.C., in the town of Hanahan, already was producing neck gaiters when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, but it ramped up production of the face covering to help meet the needs of the suddenly burgeoning market. In addition, the company pivoted into face mask production to offset the shortages in this area.

For gaiters, the company was uniquely positioned with large amounts of fabric already in production and, coupled with declining apparel sales, it was able to get gaiter production scaled and to market, according to company President Jackson Burnett.

“Logistics was actually the hard part, but once we got the lanes reset, we are now on a normal pattern,” he said.

And rather than rush into mask production, Vapor spent several weeks developing the proper



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fit and design for after-market, sublimation printing to target businesses needing PPE so that they support their branding, he added.

Gaiters, which the company has produced for more than a decade, provide some protection from particles and the elements such as sun, wind, dust and insects, so they are an in-demand item these days as many businesses, governments and other entities are requiring some type of face covering.

Vapor Apparel is working with several partners, including SEAMS' member Hemingway Apparel of Hemingway, S.C., Burnett noted.

"Our supply chain has been amazing through this," he said. "We have great partners that have stepped up in a global crisis."

The company sells its products through diverse marketplaces, everywhere from direct-to-consumer sites, retailers, businesses and brands, he said. It is currently making hundreds of thousands of gaiters and masks per month, he said.

The company initially cut about 30 percent of its work force when the crisis hit, but it is now above its employment numbers pre-coronavirus, Burnett said.

"The team has a much different look than it did prior, and through this we learned a lot about our company," he said. "We have not simply replaced positions, but have evaluated the strengths and weaknesses that became obvious during this time and are making additions that will forever change the face of our company."

Burnett pointed out that everyone's workload virtually doubled during the pandemic, and finally the company is starting to see its core business come back as well, as the PPE market is staying fairly consistent.

"Figuring out what the new normal is and will be is still a struggle," he said. "Obviously, we have employees with health concerns and others with distractions at the home, but all have dug in and understand we had to turn into survival mode."

Burnett said that it is "very fulfilling" to provide solutions in such a volatile environment and time, and wonders what the long-term impact the crisis will have on business.

"Business is still week to week," he said. "We used to plan by season, but all that is thrown out the window. Even the little decisions are big ones to make right now, as they can seriously alter the course and trajectory of the business if not handled properly."

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