



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Millennial Corner

Not your father's textile industry

A data-driven look at how Millennials are catalysts for change as both consumers and employees

By Taylor Jones

Greetings to all SEAMS members and hoping everyone is staying safe and healthy! My name is Taylor Jones and I am very excited and honored to be able to bring you this edition of Millennial Corner.

To tell you a bit about myself, I grew up in the Lowcountry of South Carolina in Charleston. After graduating from the Honors College at the University of South Carolina in Columbia (Go Gamecocks!), I moved to Charlotte, N.C., and spent several years in various digital marketing management roles and earned my MBA from Queens University.

I eventually entered the textile industry with Soft-Tex International, where I serve as the vice president of marketing and eCommerce. I have been with the company about four years, originally hired as the director of digital marketing, and I am proud of the work our team has done to triple our eCommerce business since I started.

Soft-Tex is a manufacturer of bedding and home products space with a simple mission that we live out every day: "Helping people sleep and live better." The company has evolved significantly over its 35-year history, originally started as Perry Textiles in upstate New York as a fiber pillow operation, into a well-known leading manufacturer of both fiber-filled and foam products and for cutting-edge innovations, like the company's patented REACTEX® climate control technology.

Not your father's textile industry

Popularized originally as an advertising slogan for Oldsmobile cars, the phrase "not your father's" (or a version with another family member) has come to be used with respect to anything that has become modernized, updated or generally no longer is what an older generation may expect or be used to. I seem to hear this phrase all the time and while it can apply to any generation, I cannot think of a better way to describe the change Millennials are ushering into the textile industry.

Leveraging Soft-Tex's recent consumer and bedding industry surveys, it is my hope to give you some food for thought on the changes and trends Millennials are bringing to the textile



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

industry, backed by data leveraging my company's and the industry's related research. If you'd like to learn more, please sign up for Soft-Tex's industry research.

Millennials as consumers – changing priorities, product preferences and shopping habits

Millennials are no doubt different than any generation before them. They are the first digitally connected generation having grown up with the internet and a level of “always on” interconnectedness no generation before them has seen. [Pew Research](#) notes that on the whole Millennials are more educated than any generation before them, but much has also been made about their lower levels of disposable income as a function of median annual earnings not changing that much and the level of student loan debt many Millennials face to attain their education.

As seen in this [Goldman Sachs infographic](#), student loan debt continues to climb both as a raw number and as a proportion of Millennials' expenses post-graduation.

Reading these trends, Millennials may seem like an unattractive proposition to retailers and suppliers making products, but adapting for their tastes and preferences is unavoidable. Millennials are now the largest cohort in history, counting over 92 million among us vs. 77 million Boomers. Now that Millennials are all entering adulthood and perhaps moving away from home and starting families for the first time, the group represents a huge opportunity to textile companies. So how does the textile industry reach us (myself included)?

First and foremost, Millennials shop differently. The eCommerce mix of sales vs. stores has continued to accelerate, and Millennials are a huge driving factor. A [CouponFollow survey](#) in 2019 noted that Millennials make roughly 60% of their purchases online up from 47% in 2017 and no doubt accelerated in 2020 with the pandemic, but is that true for textiles?

Soft-Tex's survey data agrees that the shift toward eCommerce is accelerating, but notes that there is still significant value of physical shopping in stores for textiles products as the tactile experience is important for customers to understand if a product will work for them. In Soft-Tex's research, physical stores were still the largest reported sales channel for bedding products, even among Millennials, for their last purchased product and also for part of the consideration set for the next purchase. With that said, eCommerce saw huge market share gains in the reported consideration set for future purchases as a sales channel.

Also, Millennial respondents noted the importance of social proof (online reviews, expert recommendations, etc.) and using smartphones and other devices as part of the research process as a key factor far more than other demographics. In this way, while eCommerce may not claim the majority of textile sales today, having good information online about the product is extremely important.



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

What about at the merchandising level? While it's no surprise that Millennials do their research, they also on the whole have less disposable income and often may choose generics vs. name brand products if the quality is seen as equivalent and savings are available. Retailers such as Amazon have made big strides in adapting to this trend with the advent of brands like AmazonBasics. On the flip side, Millennials are also more swayed by social proof and spend more time connected, so new eCommerce-native brands with some "clout" on social media like a Casper, Purple, etc. have value to this audience.

Millennials as employees – bringing new ideas worth trying

As the youngest Millennials are all now entering their workforce, the group brings new ideas informed by growing up "interconnected." As it stands, the textile industry skews a bit older (44.7) than the median age for all industries (42.5), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, so Millennials are a bit under-indexed as a mix of employees. I feel the biggest thing the textile industry can incorporate to attract and retain more Millennials is giving them a sense of purpose, which for most organizations comes back to the mission and vision statements and how they live those out.

It is reported in various surveys that Millennials [seek purpose](#) more than anything else in their careers. Considering my own path, I completely agree that finding fulfillment in what I do every day is important.

At Soft-Tex, our mission (in short form) is "helping people sleep and live better." Every day I feel good about the work I am doing to achieve this and I think the same is true at some level for every company in the textile industry. We are producing products to the greater good of our lives from PPE, towels, bedding or the raw materials to build all of these things, that sense of being part of something greater is something we can claim in the textile industry that cannot be said for many alternative jobs where Millennials might otherwise land.

To wrap up, brands and retailers are reaching Millennials in vastly different ways than they reached our parents, so with my industry hat on, I would say to employ strategies to embrace us – try something new as it is "not your father's" marketing or product that will move the industry forward. From a new slogan, new website, new marketing callouts, new product features – Millennials have valuable input and the skills to help make it happen.