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SEAMS' MIDYEAR REPORT

Members divulge plans for balance of year, reflect on lessons learned from pandemic

By Devin Steele

With things beginning to reopen after the long pandemic, the sewn products/textile industry, including SEAMS members, are beginning to stir, and are setting their sights on the second half of the year.

Among in-person events on the near horizon are Sourcing at MAGIC in Las Vegas, Outdoor Retailer in Denver and Techtextil North America in Raleigh, all in August, and SEAMS' Annual Networking Conference in Myrtle Beach in September.

As such, several members who responded to our request provided information about their plans for the balance of the year, where their businesses stand at the halfway point of 2021, some of the changes and challenges they faced during the pandemic and some of the lessons learned. Following are those reports.

America Knits

America Knits, the Swainsboro, GA-based cut-and-sew operation that opened in 2019, has stayed busy during the pandemic and plans to start attending more in-person events in August, said company cofounder and President Steve Hawkins.

Company officials will walk the floor at Techtextil North America in August and attend SEAMS' Annual Networking Conference in September. "The show in Raleigh presents an opportunity to see the latest new products and it is conveniently located in our home state," said Hawkins, a New Bern, NC-native who started the business with his lifelong friend, Dr. David Talton, a cardiothoracic surgeon. "The SEAMS networking event is something we will always try to attend. They do a great job."

Hawkins added that results obtained from in-person interaction cannot be duplicated virtually. But he opined that as companies work to reduce travel budgets, virtual events will continue to exist and will likely grow. "The younger people in our business are also completely comfortable with the setting and I do believe there's a place for it, depending on the importance and nature of the meeting."

He continued: "We actually have done a ton of business over the past year, in many cases, with people who we did not have the opportunity to meet because of the travel restrictions."

America Knits is trying to get back to full capacity, but some roadblocks are hindering the company, Hawkins said.

"The demand is there from a business standpoint, but the issues with raw material delays, as well as the inability to attract new employees, has made it tough," he said.



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America Knits was part of a coalition of cut-and-sew/textile/apparel businesses – many of them SEAMS’ members – that came together to answer the nation’s call for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the early stages of the pandemic. That provided a huge learning opportunity for the company, he noted.

“I think the most valuable takeaway is the ability to be able to pivot to a totally different product, which makes our workforce much more skilled,” he said.

With so much uncertainty abounding, and companies looking to collaborate during the PPE shift, Hawkins said that SEAMS was an invaluable resource.

“(Executive Director) Will Duncan and the team at SEAMS have done an amazing job of keeping members informed of new opportunities as well as sharing resources that decreased product development cycles when everyone was trying to make PPE to service our nation,” he said. “The pandemic experience and the way our industry pulled together, particularly the team with whom we worked that was started by Andy Warlick of Parkdale to create a large, diverse PPE supply chain, really made us proud to be in the USA textile and apparel business. I give that group a lot of credit including Hanesbrands, Fruit of the Loom, Sanmar and the other USA manufacturers involved.”

Apex Mills

Apex Mills, based Inwood, NY, will exhibit at Techtextil North America and is “hoping to reconnect with customers, learn from our peers in the industry and share our newest textile innovations,” said Jonathan Kurz, CEO & owner of Apex Mills.

He added that the priority remains with the safety and wellbeing of its people, and the decision to participate in live shows is based on the comfort level to travel expressed by his staff.

The pandemic pushed more connectivity options (i.e., digital meetings and event) into the mainstream, Kurz said.

“Virtual meetings and conferences enabled us to stay connected and informed,” he said. “However, there were many unknown factors to be navigated. Balancing costs and returns remains a high priority; notwithstanding, virtual events were well executed and an intelligent alternative to live events.

“For continued growth, there will always be a need for innovative ways to connect with our customers, suppliers, students and peers,” he continued. “As new generations enter the industry, we need to find ways to engage – both traditional and non-traditional.”

But being a fabrics’ producer, Apex Mills was hampered in some ways in the virtual world, Kurz added. “At live events, buyers like to see the construction of our samples and feel the hand of our fabrics,” he said. “Virtually, this tactile experience is not achievable.”

Apex Mills overall is back at full capacity and is fully staffed, but still faces obstacles, he noted.



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“During the pandemic, many of our customers planned for their return by strategizing their product lineup and are now ready to move into development,” he said. “Unfortunately, the global supply chain shortage is wreaking havoc on our collective planning.”

Apex Mills was among many U.S. companies that allocated tremendous resources to alter their facilities to produce PPE. For these investments to be realized going forward, there needs to be contracts from the government and municipalities to keep the factories running at a profitable capacity,” Kurz said.

He added that he looks back at the pandemic when it was at crisis levels and appreciates his company’s work to address the nation’s needs and lessons learned in the process.

“One of the biggest takeaways we have learned is the importance of observation and listening to market demand,” he said. “Apex Mills had been fortunate that we were able to pivot production and turn our attention towards making masks. Being able to identify needs and respond quickly helped us retain our workforce and contribute to the safety of people throughout America.”

And SEAMS served as a resource and repository of information for its members’ activities during the crisis, he added.

“SEAMS stepped up and in to provide the bedrock for our industry to openly communicate and provide assistance,” Kurz said. “I mentioned the importance of listening and observing – SEAMS had done exactly that to help both its members and beyond. The support provided, from networking to education, and innovation to opportunity, had been a lifeline throughout the pandemic.”

Aurora Specialty Textiles Group, Inc.

As the world continues to reopen, leaders at Aurora Specialty Textiles Group, Inc., Yorkville, IL, are looking forward to attending Techtextil North America and SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference, among other events in the coming weeks, said company President Marcia Ayala.

The company factored into its decision the health and safety of its employees and the need to network in person with customers, suppliers and old friends, she said.

Ayala said she was a fan of virtual events during the pandemic because they minimized expense and time, adding that she found them particularly useful for multi-session conferences. “Rather than traveling and spending days for a few sessions, I could participate from my office and still get the benefit of the content without the additional cost and time,” she said.

While she thinks and hopes that online meetings and gatherings will continue to be a part of the world going forward, she pointed out that collaboration and networking has suffered with virtual events exclusively for more than a year. “Market intelligence and camaraderie that can be gathered by informal conversations and over dinners are lost,” she said.



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Learning to communicate in a virtual environment was one of the lessons learned through the pandemic, she added.

“We had to learn to communicate effectively via Zoom/Teams with customers and learn how to prospect virtually,” said Ayala, who added that Aurora’s business has rebounded since the crisis began. “We had to learn how to effectively communicate and train employees with limited contact. We also improved our teamwork, agility and flexibility in reacting to rapidly changing conditions.”

And being a SEAMS’ member proved invaluable as companies were figuring out ways to survive and thrive during the economic shutdown, she said.

“Early in the pandemic, SEAMS was great in setting up a system to highlight U.S. manufacturers, their products and capabilities to be able to respond to needs during COVID,” Ayala said. “Also, the regular communications from SEAMS about textile products and manufacturing capabilities in the USA was very helpful. They also were informative about potential legislature to support PPE in USA and textiles. SEAMS’ Made in America PPE initiative, launched in May 2020, was a great service for its members.”

Because the shortage of PPE proved how vulnerable the country is to global supply chains, she said she believes President Biden’s Buy American agenda and bipartisan support in passing the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act in June is encouraging and that lawmakers are supportive of manufacturing and keeping the U.S. globally competitive. “I just hope our lawmakers don’t have too short of memories of the struggles of 2020,” she said.

Champion Thread Company

Champion Thread Company (CTC), Gastonia, NC, plans to attend Techtextil North America and SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference, according to company President Matt Poovey.

“As has historically been the case, we compare the time and resources required for each event with the market reach and our alignment with the audience they bring to determine our level of participation,” he said. “With vaccines in place and travel restrictions in rapid decline, our decision is no longer driven by the risk posed by the pandemic.”

Poovey said that online and virtual events – which were already a part of its business before COVID-19 – partially filled the void created by the pandemic, and the company will continue to augment live events with online options going forward.

“They served well to keep us connected with current and potential customers and the industries we serve,” he said. “While they could not fully deliver the hands-on experience of live events, CTC has participated in and benefitted from many of these experiences.”

As virtual events were the only option for some months, they gained further acceptance during the crisis and garnered greater participation from all groups, he added.



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As for business, Poovey noted that CTC is not only back to prior levels, but it has exceeded pre-pandemic levels of sales and product innovation since last August. “This growth has driven us to accelerate our growth and expansion plans for the business,” he said.

The challenges of COVID-19 taught Poovey and his team many lessons, he said.

“First and foremost for CTC has been the commitment and dedication we experienced from our teams and team members to maintain the business in such trying times,” he said. “We were fortunate to keep our core teams employed through the year as they bent over backwards to keep things running. We also recognize that our diversity in products and industry segments played a crucial role in weathering the storm.”

Poovey also pointed out that SEAMS was quite helpful to the company and its overall membership by facilitating the flow of information across our industry.

“Their organization of and participation in industry events benefitted not only its membership but also the industry. SEAMS’ active involvement in industry issues and initiatives such as the pivot to PPE and the effort to keep PPE production in the USA have been very valuable,” he said, adding that he hopes and expects to see new laws passed and implemented to ensure production of these and other essential products will be done in the USA.

Contempora Fabrics

Based in Lumberton, NC, Contempora Fabrics is in the process of deciding whether or not it will attend Sourcing at MAGIC in Las Vegas in August, but definitely will be present at Techtextil North America that month and, as a sponsor, SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference in September, according to company President Ron Roach.

“Attendance and costs are two of the main factors in our decision making for in-person events this year,” he said. “We are just weighing the pros and cons. We do miss in-person events, and it has to make business sense to opt in. Techtextil North America was a no-brainer. We are just over an hour away, allowing us to be flexible.”

Roach said that during the pandemic, several virtual events have been well worth the time spent, but others such as online trade shows have been more difficult and are less interactive. Still, he said he thinks they will remain part of the industry’s meeting repertoire going forward.

“As a supply chain we have learned to adapt,” he said. “Though it started as a necessity, we will continue to use this medium of connecting both internally as well as with our customers and vendors. There are several advantages to virtual settings, one being that it’s much easier to have topics outlined and stay on task. Also, virtual meetings have much less interruptions than what we would normally experience during in person gatherings.”

Contempora Fabrics’ pivot into PPE in a matter of days as the crisis was taking hold – from furloughing all employees on a Thursday and reopening for that type of work the next Tuesday – has been well documented and helped the company go “gangbusters” for several months before normal business



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levels returned, Roach said. Today, however, though the company has enough business to be running at full capacity, it is not able to due to labor shortages, he added.

Reflecting on the experience, Roach said the health crisis magnified the global economy.

“It is very difficult to insulate things one cannot control,” he said. “When the shutdowns were announced, customers put orders on hold, one after the other. We watched our overall business erode over a 24-hour period. We had to quickly come up with a game plan to continue to cover operating expenses while waiting to see how things panned out. It was uncertain to say the least.”

He continued: “We are very impressed with our industry’s ability to react and transform our operations from our typical business to PPE nearly overnight. It is organizations such as SEAMS that connected the dots and made these partnerships possible. Our PPE production sustained us from April through August, allowing us to finish 2020 in the black. We feel very fortunate, as we know many companies from different industries weren’t able to say the same.”

Reiterating the importance of SEAMS, he said the value of membership became even more apparent as COVID-19 was cresting, he also noted.

“SEAMS supplied updates on DLA bid contracts that allowed us to have the opportunity to bid,” Roach said. “SEAMS also provided us mask patterns early on when we were just getting started producing PPE, which gave way to major mask production for most of 2nd and 3rd quarter of 2020. Relationships we have built over time with other SEAMS members were invaluable during this unprecedented time.”

One of the lessons the U.S. government should take from the experience of the last year and a half is how the country’s overreliance on foreign goods can lead to near-catastrophe, Roach noted.

“USA-made PPE laws should be passed,” he said. “Throughout the last year and a half, we have all learned about the challenges of not having product made closer to home. PPE is something we need to do here.”

Hamrick Mills

Like many of its industry colleagues, fabric maker Hamrick Mills, Gaffney, SC, stepped up during the nation’s crisis to transition into PPE product, and learned how quickly things can change, according to Sales Manager, Jim Hopkins.

“Necessity is indeed the mother of invention,” he said. “When product demand changed due to the pandemic, we, like many others, had to react and make changes on the fly to try to address and take advantage of whatever opportunities presented themselves.”

Hopkins cited some redeeming qualities of online meetings, which was the order of the day for many months, for most companies.

“Sharing of information is always good, regardless of the format, and it’s good to be seen being active in the business,” he said, adding that virtual events will continue be an option for many. “It is an easy



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way to have meetings in person without being in the same room. Also, when you can see the people you are speaking with, you can also read body language, facial expressions, etc. However, the personal contact is still lost in a virtual setting – no handshakes, hugs or slaps on the back.”

Asked if the company is back to full capacity, Hopkins answered, “Yes and no. We have all equipment covered but are not producing at capacity due to labor-related issues.”

Hopkins added that SEAMS, especially during the pandemic, “should have been a cornerstone for anyone in the industry experiencing any nationalism and looking for U.S.-based manufacturing.”

For domestic PPE production going forward, he noted that he believes legislation will pass mandating U.S.-made provisions for some PPE, but that “loopholes” will be included to allow government purchasers an avenue to escape if they don’t like domestic prices, delivery, etc.

In the coming weeks, Hamrick Mills will be among those companies returning to in-person events, including Techtextil North America and SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference, he said.

Henderson Machinery, Inc.

Henderson Machinery, Inc., a Greensboro, NC -agent for global textile and equipment suppliers, understands the importance of “being present” – especially in person – at various industry events, according to Sean Burke, director of business development.

As such, as the U.S. continues to emerge from COVID-19, the company plans to exhibit at Techtextil North America in August and attend SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference.

“During the pandemic, we have been able to service and assist current and new customers with equipment,” he said. “Through our experience at Techtextil we have met new people and manufacturers that we traditionally would not fit our market scope, but the past 12-plus months have shown us how manufacturers can pivot and adapt to markets with new requirements and products.”

He added: “SEAMS has connected us with some new manufacturers and markets and continued to update membership on market conditions.”

Henderson Machinery maintained full capacity during the crisis and, with current technology and its experienced staff, it was able to troubleshoot and fix technical problems for customers, Burke said.

The company didn’t participate in a lot of virtual conferences or trade shows during the pandemic, but did hold numerous video meetings with customers, he said. “There were some learning curves to this, but overall, it cut down on travel time and we were able to talk with the right people and show off some innovative solutions for their problems.”

Nothing can take the place of face-to-face meetings, however, he added. “It’s a good way to introduce some products and get the ball rolling, but in-person visits to our showroom or a show is still the best option. In-person meetings, especially at a manufacturer’s facility, allows us to gain a better



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understanding of their entire process. Virtual meetings seem to be very focused on one specific project.”

Henderson Sewing Machine Co.

Coming out of the pandemic, Henderson Sewing Machine Co., Inc., Andalusia, AL, has a packed schedule of events for the second half of the year.

The industry supplier will exhibit at the Home Furnishings Expo in Hickory, NC, in July; Techtexil North America in Raleigh, NC; in August, SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference in Myrtle Beach, SC, in September; the PRINTING United Expo in Orlando in October; and the IFAI Expo in Nashville, TN, in November.

“There is a tremendous amount of speculation around what a post-pandemic world will look like – what will change and what will go back to normal,” said CEO Frank Henderson. “What is, at this point, beyond speculation is that the post-pandemic supply chain and manufacturing ecosystem will be vastly different. I think that we have to move on, and businesses will have to change and adapt as we have for years.”

Deemed an Essential Business during the crisis, Henderson Sewing continued to work full time the last year and a half, with no lost time, Henderson said. And what did he and his team learn through the experience? “There is no replacement for hard work ... never quit trying to change and adapt.”

Henderson added that virtual meetings and conferences during the pandemic offered a tremendous amount of information sharing on varied subjects.

“Our industry has played a major part in disseminating significant content to industry partners and the general public,” he said. “However, person-to-person meetings and conferences are still needed and desired. Virtual events and meeting can be a ‘part’ of ongoing offerings. However, I am not in favor of these virtual venues becoming a total replacement for in-person events.”

Henderson noted that SEAMS and several other industry associations have all been proactive in supplying vital information to the industry and promoting the significant contributions of the industry to the made-to-America movement during COVID-19.

InnovaKnits, LLC

InnovaKnits, an incubator company at the Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC) in Conover, NC, is almost back to full capacity as the pandemic wanes, said Managing Partner Jason Wilkins.

“Some of our customers are in retail and their customers – dance studios – have not opened back up yet,” he said.

The pandemic proved to him that “you have to be first to action when a problem or opportunity arises, even if you do not have all the information,” he said.



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Going forward, the company plans to attend Techtextil North America and probably the SEAMS' Annual Networking Conference, he noted.

Wilkins said virtual meetings during the crisis provided an opportunity to communicate consistently with visuals, without having to be in the same room, which was nothing new for the company. Already, InnovaKnits was doing quite a bit of virtual work with customers outside of the area in development and product creation, he said.

During COVID-19, SEAMS provided plenty of "moral support" and information to its membership, Wilkins pointed out. "I am sure cut-and-sew operations received very good opportunities through SEAMS."

Jason Mills, LLC

Asked about lessons learned from the pandemic, Jason Mills, LLC President Michael Lavroff gave an enlightening, high-level assessment: "Imagine the unimaginable," he said.

He added that because COVID-19 appears to be under control, the Milltown, NJ-based company, a textile convertor that is back at full throttle, plans to exhibit at Techtextil North America in August.

Lavroff said he is ready for in-person shows because the virtual format for trade fairs is difficult, and he probably won't revisit those in the future.

"I don't know if the virtual model is financially feasible for a long-term strategy," he said. "It would be our preference to not have that as the only method, but possibly only as an add-on. Hopefully, we will never have the need to return to 100% virtual."

Regarding the potential for a mandate for U.S.-made PPE in the future, Lavroff said he doesn't see legislation of this nature being passed.

"Unlike the Berry Amendment, which is designed for U.S. military end users, PPE – unless in times of pandemics – are generally commodity items," he said. "I don't think our government can force manufacturers to produce here."

LACorp

LACorp, based in Lebanon, VA, has been at full capacity since last summer and, based on current orders, looks to remain at this level through the end of the year, according to company President, Jeoff Bodenhorst Jr.

As a cut-and-sew specialist, the company's services are typically in high demand – and that demand rose as many of its customers, new and old, were pivoting into PPE production in the early ravages of the pandemic.



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“We have learned that our adaptability was an asset as we have pivoted many times since the pandemic began,” he said. “We were thrown many curveballs, but I believe we are coming out of the pandemic in a much stronger position than before the pandemic began early last year.”

As SEAMS’ president, Bodenhorst of course plans to attend SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference, but he typically doesn’t attend Techtextil North America or Sourcing at MAGIC, so won’t this year. He touted the importance of the association, especially during the crisis when it assisted members and nonmembers alike, he said.

“SEAMS has been a beacon for domestic solutions to many of the nation’s sewn product needs throughout the pandemic,” he said. “Relationships fostered through SEAMS’ membership gave me many resources and friends to call upon with many different challenges throughout the year. We were all facing similar issues, and it was great to have the SEAMS network to share and talk through these unforeseen times with colleagues.”

Bodenhorst said he participated in various online events during the pandemic, and especially liked one virtual conference format that allowed participants to “move” from table to table for more personal interaction versus “just sitting by and listening to a speaker. It made the event feel more ‘normal’ like an actual in-person event. He said he expects virtual events to remain a part of the meeting repertoire, as they are convenient and don’t require additional time away from the office. However, it is “very difficult to maintain that personal connection through virtual events versus sharing a meal or beverage together,” he said.

As for U.S.-made PPE laws becoming a reality, he added that he is hopeful that some version of legislation in that regard will pass and will go a long way to help manufacturers continue to invest in equipment, labor, space, etc. towards much-needed PPE for normal times as well as to prepare for future health events. “It is important to support these domestic supply chains,” he said.

Minnesota Knitting Mills

Minnesota Knitting Mills (MKM), Mendota Heights, MN, has a full in-person schedule as the world continues to reopen this summer, according to Britt Moore, director of Sales and Customer Services.

The company plans to attend Sourcing at MAGIC, Outdoor Retailer and Techtextil North America in August and SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference in September.

“The ability to get in front of customers is the most critical reason for attending any event this year, followed by connecting with our sourcing and manufacturing partners,” he said.

And that’s good, considering there’s nothing like the “real thing,” he said: “Connecting virtually with customers and vendors has been helpful, especially when a demonstration has been needed. However, it is not as worthwhile as seeing someone in person.”

Moore added that he believes that virtual events will not be as heavily attended going forward as in-person events reopen. “MKM will be participating in virtual events only sparingly, as an important



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aspect of our business is the quality of our products, which can be experienced only through touch and feel.”

The company gained numerous insights into its supply chain during COVID-19, he added.

“Through the many challenges of the pandemic, we learned that the sourcing and customer base of the industry is more agile and responsive than previously known,” Moore said. “Many times, a customer joined MKM – and our other sourcing and manufacturing partners – to solve a problem that arose. We also feel that this collaboration will extend into the future due to the ‘shared experience’ during the pandemic.”

Moore said that MKM is not back to full capacity due to an issue affecting numerous companies: staffing shortages.

Being a SEAMS’ member proved invaluable during the pandemic, as it allowed MKM to quickly connect the supply chain when needs arose, he said.

“On multiple occasions, we were able to meet a customer or market need solely through our connections within SEAMS,” he said. “Without those connections, the outcome from the pandemic may have been very different.”

MMI Textiles

Westlake, Ohio-based MMI Textiles, a global diversified supplier of industrial and custom fabrics and textile components, with military, tactical, medical, commercial and apparel expertise, stayed exceptionally busy during the pandemic – not only to answer the nation’s call for PPE, but to announce a major expansion.

In December, the company revealed that it would open a 30,000-square-foot production facility in Lenoir, N.C., to produce select narrow fabrics. Oh, and as an aside, in April MMI founder and President Amy Bircher attended the grand opening of a textile lab named in her honor at West Virginia University, her alma mater, after a “foundational” gift of more than \$200,000.

After such a momentous year, the company is anxious to get back in front of customers, Bircher said.

“We are excited to be back in person with our industry to showcase new products we have developed, find new partners to work with as we continue to grow and network with old friends that we haven’t seen in over a year,” she said.

Bircher and team will have a busy six-week period when they walk the Sourcing at MAGIC show in Las Vegas, exhibit at Techtexil North America in Raleigh, NC, and attend SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference in Myrtle Beach, SC.

She welcomes those in-person events after a year-and-a-half of hours of screen time with customers, partners and others, she said – but having the ability to stay connected through technology was important, she added.



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“I think we all found a new way to ‘see’ customers, partners, industry colleagues and friends, and make those interactions as personable as possible,” she said. “In fact, I feel like there was a new way of business found during these months to help get in front of people more AND still see them. I think companies found a way to engage without the expense of travel – it’s not the same as in person, but I do believe hybrid formats will continue for conferences, and trade shows will be bigger than ever as companies use that platform for their big events to network.”

Virtual meetings provided greater engagement and communication within the MMI team, which has several employees who telecommute, Bircher said. “It helped make the remote employees a bigger part of the team at HQ with daily Teams calls.”

As COVID-19 continues to wane, Bircher reflected on lessons learned about her company and the industry from the experience.

“We learned that we have the ability to be very nimble and pivot at any given moment – we are prepared as an organization if something like this happens again from both a systems and structure standpoint,” she said. “Our organization is very resourceful, and we gained new partnerships during the pandemic that will last a long time in both the PPE world and many other industries where we can collaborate.”

SEAMS

was among resources Bircher and her team found helpful and important during the crisis, she said.

“The work that was done by the SEAMS organization during the pandemic was remarkable – communication, updates, resources, collaboration and virtual networking in ways that we haven’t seen in our careers are all things that come to mind when I think of the great organization that SEAMS is for our industry,” Bircher said. “We are very thankful for their stewardship.”

Shuford Yarns

Grant Smith, Vice President of Sales at Hickory, NC-based Shuford Yarns, said his team learned three Ps during the pandemic – patience, planning and persistence.

“No one saw this past year coming, so we’ve had to learn to be flexible and adaptable to whatever situation was presented to us,” he said.

The company continued operating during the crisis and currently is at full capacity, he noted. And as things continue to normalize, Shuford Yarns reps, all of whom are fully vaccinated, plan to return to the road for upcoming events, including Techtextil North America and SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference.

“We’ve missed getting to see all of our customers and vendors in person, so we’re excited to get back out,” he said. Especially after experiencing the world of online meetings for more than a year.

“We’ve had many first-time meetings with customers during COVID, but meeting for the first time in a virtual setting is not ideal,” Smith said. “It’s always best to visit customers in person to help establish a



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sense of trust. Virtual settings can become more transactional vs. live gatherings, which is more relationship focused.”

He credited SEAMS for keeping the industry united and informed during unprecedented times.

“We all value community, and COVID took that away from most of us,” he said. “SEAMS helped bring a sense of community back to its members through virtual events, newsletters, etc., just trying to keep everyone connected.”

Smith also opined that he hopes the U.S. received a wake-up call regarding supply chain issues during the pandemic.

“I hope that the U.S. isn’t shortsighted and doesn’t soon forgets about all the logistic/supply issues,” he said. “Unfortunately, this probably won’t be the last time we deal with something like COVID. The U.S. needs to be self-sufficient and well prepared for any future events.”

Spiritus Systems

Spiritus Systems Company, Inc., a designer and manufacturer of quality equipment for the military, plans to send representatives to Techtexil North America in August, primarily due to its proximity to its headquarters in Aberdeen, NC, according to Nichole Holroyd, COO and co-owner.

That is especially thrilling for her after months of online gatherings, she said. “The most important part of events is networking and I find it extremely difficult virtually.”

During COVID-19, Spiritus Systems never decreased capacity, she added, and the pandemic proved to her that “perseverance is key,” she noted.

And, SEAMS provided a great service to members through support and communication of industry issues, she added.

Trotter’s Sewing Co.

Given the highly in-demand nature of its business, Trotter’s Sewing Co., Asheville, NC, operated at full capacity throughout the pandemic, and has been hiring the whole time, according to Lori Trotter, who owns the company with her husband Todd.

“We switched gears from products that saw a decline in business during COVID to cutting and sewing masks and gowns,” she said. “We also started a second shift in the summer of 2020 to help with the demand. But we have ceased that and are now back to one shift only.”

Todd Trotter added that he is looking forward to in-person events, with three on the horizon: The Furniture Manufacturing Expo, Techtexil North America and SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference – all conveniently taking place in the Carolinas.



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“Our determining factors have to do with the desire to get business activities ‘back to normal’ after a very long 15 months of virtual meetings and quarantine,” he said. “It will be wonderful to actually have conversations in person again!”

He added that, though less costly and more convenient and necessary during the pandemic, virtual meetings limit time and personalization. “Having been forced to use virtual meetings changed our way of doing business in many ways. But there is nothing like being face to face compared to just conversing with someone by computer screen,” he said. “When there are in-person meetings, it gives everyone a chance to get to know each other better. You may share a meal together, walk through the facilities together and have more chances to meet other staff.”

The Trotters said the lessons learned from COVID were numerous and valuable.

“First and foremost, the need to care for one another, listen to employees' concerns, support each other and sometimes pray together, became necessary more than any other time in 29 years of business!” Lori Trotter said. “We became the lifeline for many of our employees during the pandemic. Our Hispanic employee population depended on our HR department to explain the best ways to stay protected from COVID at home and at work, and it was invaluable to them.

“We also learned that by working together as a team, not only at Trotters Sewing Company, but with other manufacturers, we can accomplish just about anything,” she added. “And no matter what obstacle we are facing now, we remind ourselves that if we made it through the worst of COVID, we would make it through this, too. We also learned how helpful it is for businesses to focus on ‘coopetition,’ working together, instead of competition.”

Communication was critical during the pandemic, and SEAMS served as a resource and repository of information for all members, Todd Trotter said.

“SEAMS' leadership and constant communication to members through emails, articles, information, advice, etc. was invaluable,” he said. “The textile industry was completely overwhelmed with the need to produce PPE quickly, and having an organization like SEAMS to lead during those chaotic times was needed for all. Thanks goes to SEAMS and all the members for coming together and working together to help our country during the pandemic.”

Going forward, Lori Trotter said she hopes U.S.-made PPE laws will be put into place sooner rather than later.

“We can no longer depend on overseas companies to manufacture the majority of our healthcare essentials,” she said. “During the pandemic, I went to the hospital with my father before his surgery. The surgeon spoke with us before the procedure, and he said he hoped that our government and leaders would make it mandatory that at least 25% of all PPE, medicines and other necessary essentials for our healthcare facilities to operate and serve their communities properly was made in the USA. He said this pandemic won't be the last one, and we need to learn from it. I've shared his sentiment with many in hopes that one day it will become reality.”

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