



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Attendees give SEAMS' in-person Annual Networking Conference high marks

By Devin Steele

Based on attendee feedback, SEAMS' Annual Networking Conference last month at Myrtle Beach was an overwhelming success – particularly after a year and a half of shutdowns and virtually no gatherings ... well, just virtual gatherings.

The conference, SEAMS' first in-person event in nearly two years, featured top-notch presenters; an engaging open forum discussion focused on the difficulties the industry is facing regarding recruiting, hiring, training and retaining employees; and, yes, plenty of networking opportunities.

Three first-time attendees gave the meeting high marks. "I wasn't sure what to expect," said Marcia Ayala, President of Aurora Specialty Textiles Group, Yorkville, IL "I was very pleased to see the networking and cooperation among customers, competitors and suppliers to grow the textile business, as well as the passion of the SEAMS' staff and the attendees to grow the textile business in the USA. There is nothing like face-to-face conversations to better understand and appreciate the issues facing our businesses and share/learn from each other about how to overcome obstacles. It was very encouraging and inspiring."

Added Marty Moran, Director of Business Development and Inside Sales at American & Efird (A&E), Mount Holly, NC: "This was my first SEAMS' conference, so my expectations were based on what I had heard before, and the conference lived up to what people had told me to expect. Everyone was very open to meeting new people. I think we all had missed the camaraderie of the industry so much that it was a welcomed opportunity to catch up with old friends and make new ones. It felt really great to be back around people and socializing. Catching up with how people are doing both personally and professionally was welcomed."

And Ram Sareen, Founder & CEO of Tukatech, Inc., Los Angeles, said that after 19 months of confinement and then attending a face-to-face meeting was a stark contrast and a "treat for the soul."

"Since this was my first SEAMS' conference, I regret not attending previous meetings," he said. "I met many new people and caught up with some old friends."

John Robinson, Senior Vice President of Client Engagement at Exenta, Inc., New York City, said that SEAMS always organizes a great event. "However, it's not the event, but the members that make this event paramount. Why? SEAMS' members are real and open about their challenges as well as their solutions to the challenges. Everyone benefits. And there is nothing to replace seeing the faces of SEAMS' members live! The smiles, laughter and meaningful interactions are priceless, and being live brings out our best."

Jim Hopkins of longtime member Hamrick Mills, Gaffney, SC, noted that the conference exceeded his expectations. "Will (Duncan, SEAMS' Executive Director), Jeoff (Bodenhorst, SEAMS' President and President of LACorp.), Nancy (Kinderknecht, SEAMS' Business Manager) and the Board did an outstanding job with the speakers and the topics for discussion in spite of the environment and the focus on labor issues."



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Henderson Machinery Co., Greensboro, NC, sent three people to the conference, including Brent Jones, its General Manager. "I think it was a better conference than potentially anticipated and was well attended, considering so many companies have anti-travel policies still in place due to COVID," he said. "It is always interesting to spend time with members I may not know quite as well. We met several individuals and have some possible follow-up opportunities with these customers. As we learn more about each other's business, there are often opportunities that arise neither company would have recognized on the surface or from a brochure or website."

Frank Henderson, president of Henderson Sewing Machine Co., Andalusia, AL, said the event was much anticipated after the industry proved its true value during the pandemic.

"The conference exceeded my expectations in showing the industry and America that SEAMS matters," he said. "I am especially proud of the textile and sewn products industries and the significant contribution that many made in pivoting their businesses to answer the call of our nation during COVID. I believe SEAMS members made a difference in America. These efforts continue to motivate and give each of us the strength to fight hard as we recover. I hope that each of us is more resilient, more appreciative and thankful for the life around us and the meaningful work we all do for each other."

Henderson added: "SEAMS conferences are always about reconnecting with old friends and meeting new friends and new members – and, yes, I did this year. There are still challenges ahead, but I remain incredibly hopeful and expect the future will continue to be reconnecting with the people and customers who enrich our lives."

Jason Wilkins, Managing Partner at InnovaKnits, LLC, Conover, NC, said the event was "great" and "I was very happy with the turnout, considering the circumstances (of the pandemic)."

Jeff Gladden, Textile Engineer at Buhler Quality Yarns by Samil Spinning, Jefferson, GA, called it "terrific!" and added that it was his first business outing since the pandemic struck. "It felt strange at first, but it got better after a while. SEAMS' conferences always exceed my expectations. I learn a lot, meet old friends and make new ones each time."

Britt Moore, Director of Customer Services at Minnesota Knitting Mills, Mendota Heights, MN, used another adjective to describe the experience. "It was somewhat surreal to travel and meet with people again. However, it also provides a sense of normalcy. It was also surprisingly exhausting, but not in a negative way. The conference exceeded expectations and it was great to reconnect with everyone who attended. Being able to quickly discuss and resolve issues was refreshing after 18 months of virtual connections. There is no substitute for talking to someone in person, and no amount of virtual meetings and calls can replace that."

And Tanya Wade used still another adjective to summarize the conference: Energizing.

"Networking is a driving force for many people, especially in-person events," said Wade, Client Intake Administrator and Project Coordinator at the Carolina Textile District (CTD), Morganton, NC, and Entrepreneur Intake Administrator at the Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC), Conover, NC "So after spending the last year or more pretty much in isolation at work and the office, it was exciting to catch up

EMPOWERING THE MADE IN AMERICA MOVEMENT



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

with old acquaintances and make some new ones as well. It definitely exceeded my expectations, as I thought the Delta variant would have more of a negative impact on the attendance than it did.”

And Wayne Wilson, Founder and Executive Vice President at Prime Medical LLC, Largo, FL, said the event was like a “family reunion.”

“I always look forward to the SEAMS networking conferences,” he said. “I always walk away with valued information I can apply to my own business. And I think I found a domestic manufacturer that I believe is going to work out after I lost my small domestic manufacturer in Miami to cancer.”

John Paleczny, Manager of Sales & Marketing at Thermopatch Corp., Auburn, NY, said he could “feel the excitement” of attendees who were able to be among each other again. Being only his second SEAMS’ meeting, he added the conference also eclipsed his expectations, as the camaraderie and chances to meet everyone were abundant.

“Nothing beats face-to-face contact with some of the high-profile contacts attending the SEAMS’ conference,” he said. “Just to be able to shake a hand, say hi or even enjoy a favorite beverage with the group was worth it. The meeting themselves were very informative.”

Xochil Herrera Scheer, Owner of the Chicago Pattern Maker, added that she was on the fence about attending because of the travel involved as the Delta variant was raging.

“I am so glad I did though because the experience this year far exceeded my expectations,” she said. “I reconnected with people, forged many new connections and had many follow-up calls and emails the week following the conference, where I found great opportunities. I also got a sense from many people that collaboration is more on the table than ever before – and I think that’s a result of our industry community coming together from necessity related to PPE production, but it gives me incredible hope for the future and working together to bring in and train the next generation workforce, and continue to reshore and grow manufacturing in the US. We can all grow together!”

Scheer added: “It was so good to be in the physical company of others after so long – virtual events just are not the same. The information was amazing and I’m thankful for the modern tools we have available to us to make that all happen and make collaboration easier through the last 18 months or so – but it doesn’t replace being in the same room with people and making meaningful connections.”

Mindy Martell, President of Clothier Design Source, St. Paul, Minn., said that after SEAMS’ and other industry events were postponed over the last year and a half, the event exceeded her expectations.

“We made some great connections up and down the supply chain from us,” she said. “We have established new vendors and clients as a result of the conference and learned a lot! We are busier than ever and booked out longer than ever in the past. It would have been good to have a couple more high-caliber speakers, but understanding the situation we are in with COVID and how some people just aren’t travelling or available yet, it was great!”

EMPOWERING THE MADE IN AMERICA MOVEMENT



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

The links that bind

Networking is a big part of every SEAMS' Conference, and such activities were welcomed by many members. Some share snippets of their experiences, especially on the golf course.

"Getting to golf with my friends Ron Roach (President of Contemporaria Fabrics) and Roy Lockett (Sales Rep at Hamrick Mills), along with meeting Brent Jones of Henderson Machinery made the golf outing foursome a great time," said A&E's Moran.

Said Jones: "The golf and other social events always provide a relaxed way to get to know each other on a more personal basis."

"I got to spend a lot of time with Frank Henderson during golf," said Buhler's Gladden. "He is a great person, and I enjoyed getting to know him better. We had a lot of fun."

"The networking events and golf tournament allows you to spend enough time with people to get to know them on a personal level," added Wade of the MSC and the CTD, who won the putting contest. "That type of relationship allows you to build upon it, instead of just being another name and face that you recognize from attending the conferences. Thanks again to Marty (Bailey, Founder & President of TSG Apparel) and Dan (Laturno, President & CEO of Peoria Production Shop) for the golf lessons, encouragement and overall great time on the course!"

Takeaways & highlights

By putting people "in the same room," SEAMS extended the opportunity for members to commiserate, learn and discuss similar challenges, particularly around the labor shortage. Several spoke to the value of the experience, along with key takeaways and highlights of the conference.

"Learning from many about their challenges and successes was the biggest takeaway," said Tukatech's Sareen. "I had no idea about many small companies were still out there providing services. Learning about their frustrations and suggestions coming from other members of the group showed how interconnected the members were. I loved it."

Said Henderson of Henderson Sewing: "The SEAMS' conference provided information to members and sent a message that this industry is alive and well. Members are busy, but we all need more workers. We have workforce development issues. But I was encouraged to see some new Millennials who are growing fast and contributing to our Industry."

The general labor issue theme also stuck with Paleczny of Thermopatch. "Hearing that everyone is going through the same issues with hiring and retaining new employees was a takeaway," he said, adding that a positive for his company was "being able to discuss Thermopatch's products and have a tabletop exhibit to show what we are capable of."



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Likewise, Clothier Design Source's Martell came away with the knowledge that everyone is short staffed and "we don't see an end in sight, so we must start hiring more creatively and thinking differently," she said.

"I learned that the labor problem is here to stay for a while," added InnoVaKnits' Wilkins. "For a small business like ours that would like to be a bigger one day, it certainly makes you rethink your growth strategies."

The highlight for Minnesota Knitting's Moore was hearing the energy and ambition of everyone who attended, he said, and the hope for the future as the market and industry stabilizes.

Similarly, Hamrick Mills' Hopkins said he was encouraged by the general level of excitement and discussions during networking activities. "Everyone was very engaged," he said.

Relationships that emerge from networking experiences was important to MSC's/CTD's Wade, she said. "I meet a lot of people at conferences and, while you get to learn about their company, you don't always get to know the individual. And one of the big upshots for me is that I love that SEAMS is looking at ways to band the members together to tackle the training issues the textile and sewn goods industries are facing."

Exenta's Robinson added that the conference reinforced that your team is your first priority. "Take care of your team and they will take care of your customers!," he said.

As for the business sessions, some members noted the invaluable insights they gleaned from the speakers and from each other.

"I think the topics covered were definitely on point with issues everyone in the room is facing in the current manufacturing environment," said Henderson Machinery's Jones. "There was a good selection of speakers and topics, and (Unifi, Inc. Executive Chairman) Al Carey as a keynote speaker was fantastic. He was a great guy to meet, and we enjoyed his presentation."

The second-day keynoter, American Giant Founder and CEO Bayard Winthrop – who joined the company via Zoom – offered key insights to Buhler's Gladden. "Learning more about one of our downstream customers, American Giant, was super," he said.

Chicago Pattern Maker's Scheer said she collected valuable information from the presenters.

"The keynote by Al Carey of Unifi was a great kickoff, and I loved the focus on the employees that drive the organization, how surveys and conversations with their team helped them to create a better work environment and give the training and benefits that people were looking for. And I loved the talk by Ram Sareen of Tukatech and the forward-thinking microfactories and how small-batch and on-demand are so important to the future of American manufacturing," she said. "Circularity and fiber recycling were great topics presented by The Material Return – and what a cool tour that would be! I loved hearing from Claire Crunk of Trace Femcare and learning more about American Giant from Bayard Winthrop."

EMPOWERING THE MADE IN AMERICA MOVEMENT



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Scheer added that she was “thrilled” to see more young people and more women in attendance than ever before.

“That was awesome, and some of us even had lunch after the conference ended Friday before our flights, which bonded us even more,” she said. “As always, the bonding experience with fellow SEAMS’ members is not to be missed, and I think many were eager to be out and having fun together, a welcome respite to a stressful time. I had a great experience overall.”