



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

## Annual Networking Conference

### **SEAMS members turn out in force for long-awaited in-person event**

MYRTLE BEACH, S.C. – Nearly 100 members gathered at the Marina Inn at Grande Dunes here last month for SEAMS' first in-person event in nearly two years, its Annual Networking Conference.

And, judging from the spirit of togetherness and camaraderie, the excitement of being back together was tangible – especially after an unprecedented period of uncertainty when many members collaborated and stepped up to address the shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and illuminate the sewn products and textile industry's importance to the nation.

Attendees heard from a number of dynamic speakers, including keynoter **Al Carey**, Executive Chairman at Unifi, Inc. and former CEO of Pepsico North America; keynoter **Bayard Winthrop**, Founder & CEO of clothing brand American Giant (virtually); **Ram Sareen**, CEO and Founder of technology solutions provider Tukatech; **Claire Crunk**, Founder of Trace Femcare and Southeast Hemp Fiber; **Scott Gutche**, Senior Director of U.S. Sourcing and Manufacturing for Walmart (via video); and Material Return's **Bob Carswell**, Research and Development Director, and **Patrick McClure**, Enterprise Manager.

Also, an open forum discussion focused on the difficulties the industry is facing regarding recruiting, hiring, training and retaining employees. Jill Coleman, Vice President of Global Business Development and Sales at Motif, moderated the engaging, informative session.

During the Business Sessions, officer and board member elections were announced, and SEAMS, with strategic partner the Reshoring Initiative®, announced winners of the 2021 Sewn Products National Reshoring Awards. Plus, the association presented its highest honor, the Sarah Friedman Award, to Devin Steele, publisher of eTextileCommunications.com and SEAMS' social media manager and newsletter content provider.

SEAMS' President Jeoff Bodenhorst Jr., President of LACorp (Lebanon Apparel Corp.), Lebanon, VA., will conclude his two-year term on December 31. He will be succeeded by newly elected Ron Roach, President of Contempora Fabrics, Lumberton, NC. Elected Vice President was Britt Moore, Director of Customer Services at Minnesota Knitting Mills, Mendota Heights, MN, while Brent Jones, General Manager at Henderson Machinery Co., Greensboro, NC, was tapped Secretary/Treasurer.

Elected directors were Wayne Wilson, Prime Medical, Largo, FL; Dennis Jackson, Venus Group, Fort Lawn, SC; Mindy Martell, Clothier Design Source, St Paul, MN; Susana Almack, Almack Liners, Chatsworth, CA; and Marty Bailey, TSG Apparel, Long Beach, CA.

Elected Supplier Directors to serve three-year terms were Ryan Smith, Printcraft Company, Inc, Lexington, NC; Stacey Bridges, Carolina Cotton Works, Inc., Gaffney, SC; and Jim Hopkins, Hamrick Mills, Inc, Gaffney, SC. Board Members not up for election for 2022 included Bodenhorst Jr., Ex-officio; Tanya Wade, Education Director, Manufacturing Solutions Center, Conover, NC; and Alex Whitley, Supplier Director, Contempora Fabrics, Lumberton, NC.



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“SEAMS is thrilled to again partner with Harry Moser and the Reshoring Initiative on this award and be able to celebrate our winners at our annual conference with their peers and colleagues in attendance after a very difficult year in 2020,” said Will Duncan, Executive Director, SEAMS. “Our membership not only continues to grow but grows stronger. These winners represent all of our members focused on the made-in-America movement with SEAMS.”

Venus Group, based in Foothill Ranch, CA, with additional cut-and-sew operations in Fort Lawn, SC, was presented with the Cut & Sew Manufacturers Award. Soft-Tex International, based in Waterford, NY, was presented the esteemed Brand Award for its fiber and hybrid pillows, memory foam pillows and mattress topper products.

The winners represent progressive companies focused on the made-in-America movement supporting the economy and bringing production of goods back to the country.

Devin Steele, Founder of [etextilecommunications.com](http://etextilecommunications.com), and SEAMS member was presented the Sarah Friedman Award. This award was named in honor of the former Executive Director who helped transform the association from a small, regional apparel manufacturing group into the widely recognized national association for the sewn products industry. Steele has helped grow SEAMS' social media presence over the last three years. He has raised its national exposure resulting in a significant increase in SEAMS membership. In addition to his support of SEAMS, Devin's impact on the sewn products industry is far reaching. And, this was never more evident than by the lengthy standing ovation he received when presented with this award.



## Speaker highlights



Unifi's Carey gave an inspiring keynote on leadership. He opened by commending Tom Caudle, who recently retired as President & COO of Unifi after a 42-year career with the company.

“Tom kept this company together while we were going through some difficult times,” Carey said. “When COVID hit, that first quarter we were down 52% in sales. One of months in that quarter we were down 70%. I’ve never seen that. That made me wonder what I was getting myself into (by joining the company). “There is no playbook to dig yourself out of a pandemic. But there is a playbook that deals with adversity. Adversity can actually be an advantage – it depends on how you deal with it.”

**EMPOWERING THE MADE IN AMERICA MOVEMENT**



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Carey opined that COVID accelerated three business trends that were already rising: 1) The labor shortage – “and it’s here to stay, I’m afraid to say;” 2) remote working; and environmental sustainability – “the young generation is not going to be able to accept anything else,” he said.

He expounded on each point through anecdotes from his long career in leadership positions.

He added later: “I always like leading a team that is hungry and humble. Usually when you have that, and you have the right things in place, you can make a lot happen.”

Tukatch’s Sareen, is recognized as one of the textile and apparel industry’s thought leaders and visionaries. His did a deep dive into the endless possibilities of communal microfactories and ways that

companies can “create the future” by seeing and embracing technological changes. As an introduction, he pointed out that his wife’s name is “Tuka” – and he is the “Tech.”

At 72, Sareen said his goal for the rest of his career is to teach people how to disrupt and embrace new technologies that will help the industry continue to advance.

“Technology is created by the laziest people’s desires,” he said. “Press a button and things should happen. We’re lazy, and thus technology is invented. I was called ‘Mr. Disruptor’ way before disruption was a buzzword. It meant originally troublemaker. I was thrown out of seven schools before I finished high school, so that has always been my way of thinking.”

American Giant’s Winthrop addressed attendees virtually – at 5 a.m. PT – from San Francisco. He presented via a Q&A format with SEAMS’ Executive Director Will Duncan.

American Giant was founded in February 2012 to address what Winthrop saw as a lack of affordably priced high-quality American-made products. Winthrop explained how he built his U.S. supply chain and the challenges encountered, and subsequent successes as the company grew into a well-known brand. He believed that by selling direct to the customer, a business could save enough on distribution and marketing to sell at mainstream priced products manufactured in America. Most of its products are grown and produced in the Carolinas.

“Most brands don’t have the sophistication or the patience (to build a domestic supply chain),” Winthrop said. “I think we all need to better align in order to make this happen. One of the things that was very clear is that when you manufacture in China, there is a huge emphasis on speed. Domestic suppliers need to become more responsive and flexible in order to allow brands to carry less inventory. Being able to respond by being close by is a major advantage.”



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Claire Crunk of Trace Femcare and Southeast Hemp Fiber, presented during the Young Entrepreneur segment of the conference. Based in Nashville, Tenn., Trace Femcare makes premium tampons with a hemp and climate beneficial™ cotton core and 100% hemp applicators. These tampons will change the industry and better the world by restoring the earth through regenerative practices and the natural capabilities of hemp, Crunk said.

She explained the challenges and opportunities for growing the business and the brand, market data, consumer buying habits, supply chain collaboration and more.



Material Return's Carswell and McClure discussed textile sustainability and circularity. They are based in Morganton, NC, under the umbrella of The Industrial Commons. "We collect and custom sort textile waste, process it, spin it into yarn and turn it into fabric. Then, our partners at the Carolina Textile District create the finished products," Carswell said. "We can do this with a diverse range of mixed inputs of waste – all within 75 miles of our facility." To date, Material Return has recycled 1.3 million pounds of textile waste, they reported.

Walmart's Gutche addressed the group via video. He provided more information on the global retailer's \$350 billion American Lighthouse initiative, announced earlier this year. "Textiles will be the initial area of focus, and we are working with key stakeholders in specific regions of the country to identify and overcome top-down barriers to U.S. manufacturing in the sector," he said. "The goal of American Lighthouse is to support more American jobs."