



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Member Spotlight: Trotter's Sewing Co.

Note: Each edition of our newsletter, SEAMS features one of our esteemed members. In this edition of SEAMS Member Spotlight, Trotter's Sewing Co. of Asheboro, NC, is highlighted. Lori Trotter, who co-owns the company with her husband Todd, was interviewed for the piece.

Year founded: October 1992

Primary specialties: Contract cutting and sewing

Number of employees / locations? 70 employees, all in Asheboro NC

Markets served: Furniture, Hospitality, Home Furnishings, Bedding, Medical, Pet, Outdoor Industries, among others

Insights into company's history and current ownership:

The company was founded in October of 1992 by Barbara and Jerry Trotter of Asheboro. The couple both came from textile backgrounds, and started BJ Con-Sew, Inc. (BJ stands for Barbara & Jerry or Barbara Jean, depending on which one you ask.) They began the company with one customer. They did cutting and sewing of mattress covers, but added more contracts through the years. Todd, their only son, worked in the family business during high school and after graduation. He left the business for a few years to pursue a culinary degree. But long hours in the food industry with a young family at home eventually led him back to the family business. His wife Lori also joined the team and today, Todd (CEO) and Lori (Business Manager) are operators of the company, and their daughters have worked in the business as well. (Two are attending college now, and one is raising her two young boys.)

In 2018, the company name was changed to Trotters Sewing Company to reflect the change in leadership, as well as incorporate the entire family, as the second and third generations are now running the business. The company continues to grow, and add more contracts and products each year. Contract cutting and sewing is the majority of the company's focus, but other capabilities include grommeting services, bulk packing and shipping and sonic welding. TSC also added a new division to the company in 2020, ReTextyled, which focuses on upcycled products using recycled or reusable fabrics & supplies.

What are your company's differentiators – not only externally to your customers and suppliers but also internally to your employees?

"TSC is a family-owned business, and that 'family' includes our employees and customers. Most employees have been with the company for several years, as well as many of our customers. TSC strives to put employees and customers first, and operates by the Golden Rule ... treat others the way that you want to be treated. Also, the company's focus on 'quality before quantity' and standing behind what we say we'll do and delivering on that promise goes a long way with our customers. TSC will take on small production runs, as well as the longer, ongoing ones. And we try to help those who reach out to us for cutting and sewing services even if we cannot serve them. We want to lead them to other SEAMS members or other textile associations because we strongly believe in supporting and furthering Made in America."



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Tell us more about your pivot into PPE during the pandemic. Please explain how you did this, how much of that constituted your entire business through certain periods, etc. Are you still manufacturing PPE?

“We pivoted to PPE in about a four-week period in March of 2020. We saw that orders for our contracted furniture upholstery lines were rapidly dropping, and the demand for PPE was quickly growing! Honestly, the demand for PPE was completely overwhelming! We first began sewing masks for our local community, and then added more mask lines and began cutting and sewing hospital gowns. Manufacturing PPE was probably more than half of our business for several months in 2020, and we started a second shift line to try to meet the demand. Pivoting products quickly is something that we do on a regular basis since we are contract cutters and sewers, as our contracts change especially on the small run production lines. We already had the machinery and the people in place and they learned quickly to produce PPE. The hardest part for us was just trying to keep up with all the calls and emails from people wanting more PPE.”

What were your biggest challenges and lessons learned during the COVID-19 crisis?

“Some of the biggest challenges was trying to keep everyone calm and feel safe at work, something looking back now I think we did a good job at. We implemented wearing masks very early, and we worked with our local health department closely to help us when difficult situations arose. We learned when and who needed to be quarantined, and at one time we had our whole inspection department on quarantine. But we adapted to each situation, and we also learned that everyone, especially those in leadership positions, would be asked to do things they weren't necessarily used to doing in order to continue operations. But I believe it made us a better company and better leaders overall for these reasons. We learned just exactly how important TEAMWORK is to an organization, and to trust that no matter what, working together and listening to each other, we can overcome most obstacles. We joke now that if we can make it through 2020 and now 2021, which has presented different challenges, we can make it through anything.”

The pandemic aside, how has your company adapted over the last few years to remain competitive, especially as a lot of textile/apparel/sewn production moved offshore?

“One way we have adapted is opening our doors more to smaller order quantities and production runs. At one time, BJ Con-Sew, Inc. had long production bedding lines mostly, but in 2008 when the economic downturn hit many companies, including ours, we realized that three or four big customers was something we couldn't rely on going forward. We needed more diversity in our services and customers by accepting smaller production runs, and that philosophy has sustained us well, and we've seen growth from it. Many of the customers that we now serve don't want to take their product offshore, one because they don't need a container full of product, and two, they want to be close to the manufacturer to have better control of their product as well as shipping costs. We also focus on quality, sustainable products and timely delivery, something that our customers rely upon and desire.”

What are your thoughts on the Made-in-America movement and what is your strategy to remain competitive here?

“We continue to see the Made in America movement strengthen. The supply chain disruptions during the pandemic have shed more light to the fact that we need to search for ways to strengthen local supply chains and produce domestically more of the necessary products we use daily. Being located in NC has helped us in many ways, as the Carolinas have strong textile histories, and being members of



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

SEAMS, Manufactured in NC and the Carolina Textile District have brought new light to our business and our capabilities. We are also diverse in the kinds of products that we can manufacture, as we are able to work with lightweight fabrics to heavyweight ones, such as gauze and knits to 60 oz. vinyls and leather. We also keep in stock many different kinds of industrial sewing machines that we can pull in and out for different contracts.”

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for manufacturing in the USA as well as this hemisphere?

“One of the biggest challenges is still the mindset of overseas’ pricing, not only for consumers but for potential customers wanting to reshore. We cannot compete against overseas pricing, and we are open with new customers from the beginning on that. On our website it states that TSC strives to provide living wages to its employees, as well as produce quality products in a timely manner for the customer. We know we cannot compete with overseas pricing, but we hope our customers find added value in supporting American textiles, its workers and quality craftsmanship. And if more companies and consumers adopted that stance, it would help U.S. manufacturing as a whole. Another important statement that’s on our website says, ‘Trotters Sewing Company appreciates that when a company chooses to manufacture their products in the USA, they also choose to support American textile companies, their workers and communities.’ We have learned that sticking to our core values of supporting our employees, their families and our communities, everyone wins in the long run ... it cannot all be about profits. It’s about the people too, and the environment.”

What is your business outlook for your company for the foreseeable future?

“Although we are facing some very uncertain times, we continue to see the demands for our cutting and sewing services grow more and more each day, and we feel positive that manufacturing in the U.S. will continue to strengthen. We’re also hopeful that our new upcycling division ReTextstyle will grow as consumer demand for products sourced and manufactured locally using recycled and/or repurposed fabrics and supplies increases. We are hopeful that this new division will help us to employ more people in our community, as well as do some good for the planet while keeping more textile waste from the landfills. Also, if a fabric or weaving company would like to partner with us on ways to conserve on textile waste by either donating or selling some of theirs to us at a discounted price, please let us know. (If interested, [send email here](#)).”

Please offer a comment on business conditions, your opinion on the health of the apparel/textile/sewn products industry markets you serve now and going forward and what things will make you successful in this environment?

“Business conditions during the pandemic continue to be very complicated with supply chain disruptions as well as labor shortages. Honestly, if we could hire more people, we could probably double our production, but all sectors of businesses are facing this dilemma today. So at TSC we are concentrating on training first and foremost, and have started a new program called Earn to Learn. We are teaching some of our line inspectors new skills such as sewing, as well as opening this program up to the local community. The labor shortage problem will be ongoing, so like all companies today, we are trying new things to attract new employees to TSC, including an open book management system and profit sharing, which is being implemented now. The labor shortage has also placed our business in a unique position as more and more companies seek to outsource work, it has opened the door to new sectors of industry for us. And we feel this will continue. We also believe that if we continue to stick to



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

our basic principles of putting people first, in the long run, employment growth and business profits will follow.”

How long have you been a member of SEAMS and please speak to the value it brings?

“Not sure exact timeline, but maybe seven or eight years. SEAMS is a voice and advocate for U.S. textile manufacturing and their contributions to the industry and its members is invaluable – from the website with the member and supply chain database, to the strength of its members to support each other and join together especially seen during the pandemic, to being a place to turn for support to some of the harder issues facing our industry today (pandemic, reshoring, labor shortage, supply chain issues) to the friendships with members that continue to grow through the years.”