



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

## Open Your Doors – Welcome Opportunities

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We are quickly approaching the Fall 2023 SEAMS Annual Networking Conference – September 12-15 on the campus of NC State University in Raleigh, NC, – and there’s lots to be excited about!

I will be leading a panel discussion on Friday morning, titled “Circularity Through Collaboration.” In reviewing the conference schedule – **collaboration** is a recurring theme, and one that you’re likely paying attention to (and if not, you ought to be).

Our industry is built on relationships, and working together across the supply chain to move things forward to the end consumer. Each of us plays an integral role in this process. Made in the USA is both a value and a passion of each of ours, but sometimes it comes as a challenge. Consumers have become more educated and savvy, and are largely very aware of the ills of the worldwide industry, and frustrated by the negative impact it has on the environment, the workers, and low-value end products.

However, they aren’t really exposed to or understand much about American manufacturing. More transparency would help this. People want to see how things are made, and many are even becoming more interested in making things themselves, and working with their hands. Yet, we struggle to fill factories and mills with skilled operators.

During SEAMS’ Annual Networking Conference, two tours are scheduled for our group – first at the NC State Wilson College of Textiles, followed by Cotton Incorporated. Tours are a great way to share what you do with the public, build trust and relationships with your customers and expose the next generation to potential career paths. It’s likely that you welcome brand executives to your space on occasion, but how often do you open your doors for learning opportunities – younger industry professionals, students, or even the general public?

In recent years, SEAMS’ President Ron Roach, President of Contempora Fabrics, has spearheaded tours of this nature, notably the AAPN Carolina Mill Tour for brands and retailers, with stops at multiple area mills and partners over the course of a few days. Said Roach:

*“The Carolina Tour is probably the most popular event in the textile industry today. It usually has a waiting list and sells out very quickly once the dates are announced.*

*This tour is solely about education [which] started as an effort to pass along the experience and technical knowledge that we have along the U.S. supply chain to some*



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*of the younger and less experienced people that are coming into the industry. Clearly there is a thirst for knowledge as we have had attendees [whose experience level ranges] from being on the job a few weeks to very high-level senior positions at major brands and retailers.*

*It is really important that we as a supply chain continue to provide onsite education so that everyone can better understand how things actually work on the manufacturing level.*

*The intent for all of the member companies that participate on the tour was always to provide education as a way to give back to the industry.”*

Also, SEAMS this year coordinated a West Coast Meet-and-Greet event in Los Angeles. A wide-ranging factory tour was provided by host Los Angeles Apparel Founder & Owner, Dov Charney. Attendees were able to see and interact with all of the company’s production processes. The event was sponsored by SEAMS’ member Tukatech, Inc., also based in Los Angeles. Ram Sareen, Founder & CEO of Tukatech, TukaWeb and TukaCenters:

*“To be able to tour the factory of the largest manufacturer in the G7 is an invaluable experience for any apparel business owner. To see a real working cutting room running with the minimum number of people, to see NO work in process on the sewing floor, to see that it can be done and is being done in America was a great benefit to many.”*

Dearborn Denim regularly hosts factory tours open to the general public, as well as to educational institutions. Said Rob McMillan, Founder/Owner of Dearborn Denim:

*“As a direct-to-consumer manufacturer, offering factory tours is a great way to get to know customers face to face. They really enjoy learning about the manufacturing process and asking questions to better understand the supply chain. The experience ends up being a lot of fun and builds customer trust.”*

Minnesota Knitting Mills (MKM) opens their doors throughout the year for various educational groups, non-profits, and business partners. According to Britt Moore, VP Sales and Customer Support at MKM:

*“We have done extensive educational tours within our facility, and the value of the tours cannot be overstated. Students and teachers are always amazed at the complexity and processes that products go through during production. This leads to genuine interest and countless questions, even from those attendees that were only marginally interested at the beginning of the tour, as well as continued interest and discussion after the tours. We consistently receive tour requests via referrals from previous participants, and attendance always increases on repeat tours from the same educational facilities.*

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*Recruiting has benefited greatly from this exposure, by looping in both the schools as well as the students themselves.*

*The reaction from our customer base (both new and old) is similar, and customer buy-in always accelerates after a tour. They feel more connected to their products and knowledgeable about the process, allowing for easier and more open communication – which benefits both sides.”*

I'm a huge fan of learning and networking in this way, and I try to tour facilities when I travel – reaching out to contacts and asking for introductions when available. When incorporated into a conference schedule, I always take advantage of the opportunity. The more we can each see and gain a better understanding for how a company operates, the better we can engage or refer business to one another. By extending this invitation to students or to the public, it builds trust within the community, and inspires people to consider another career path.

Beyond opening your physical doors, sharing some behind the scenes images, celebrating your workers, or sharing an insight, or commenting on industry news articles, are great ways to foster confidence and increase visibility for your company. Maybe social media isn't your thing, but our industry is incredibly active on LinkedIn – so I'd recommend starting there. Some great examples I love are:

[CCW](#) shares a post with brand partner American Giant, highlighting one of their employees and shares his story.

[Trotter Sewing](#) shares an image of a sewing operator on the floor and what she's working on.

[Aptean Apparel](#) shares an industry article on sustainable supply chains, along with their thoughts.

No matter your posting style or frequency, the important thing is to just start. I know there are many out there who will enjoy learning more about your point of view, and seeing what happens behind the scenes.

I am looking forward to meeting with and collaborating with my fellow SEAMS members, and in learning more about how you collaborate with one another across the supply chain. I hope to see more open doors, and hear how this impacts your business. As an industry which faces ever-changing challenges constantly, we can forge forward through strengthening our relationships with brands, bringing better understanding to what we do, and inspire the next gen workforce to thrive. Being open and more transparent is critical and by taking small steps, we can make that happen.

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