



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

What's keeping SEAMS leaders up at night in 2026?

By Devin Steele

If one word defines 2026 so far, it is pressure.

Pressure to modernize. To enforce trade rules. To grow responsibly. To compete — for real — in a volatile global market.

In conversations with SEAMS member leaders this month, a clear pattern emerged: this is not a year of incremental improvement. It is a year of structural decisions that will shape the future of U.S. sewn products manufacturing.

From robotics and AI to USMCA enforcement and workforce stewardship, the challenges are interconnected — and so are the solutions.

Automation, AI and the modernization gap

For Frank Henderson, CEO of Henderson Sewing Machine Co., Andalusia, AL, the issue begins on the factory floor — but it is rooted in decades of structural shifts.

“Currently, the manufacturing processes throughout the nation’s textile and sewn products industrial base have either none or very low levels of automation,” Henderson said. “Modern textile and cut-and-sew factories still display rows upon rows of workers guiding fabric manually.”

He argues that while other sectors have embraced robotics, AI-driven models and digital integration, much of the sewn products industry continues to operate with systems largely unchanged for generations.

“For much of the 20th century, the United States stood as the undisputed global leader in manufacturing,” he said. “That dominance eroded through offshoring and globalized supply chains — and even more sharply after China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001.”



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Henderson traces the shift to the 1980s, when companies prioritized quarterly returns and embraced just-in-time efficiency over resilience, hollowing out domestic expertise and concentrating production abroad. The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical tensions, he said, exposed a brittle supply chain increasingly dependent on foreign competitors for critical goods and materials.

Against that backdrop, Henderson sees automation and advanced manufacturing as strategic imperatives.

“The deployment decisions and operational investments made today will determine the industrial leaders of tomorrow,” he said. “Automation and industrial transformation is not a distant possibility — it is occurring now and accelerating rapidly.”

Henderson Sewing Machine Co. is working with manufacturers to implement robotic sewing cells, Manufacturing Execution Systems and digital twins designed to strengthen both plant performance and supply chain resilience.

Lionel Vargas Cruz, VP of Advanced Manufacturing & Innovation at ISAIC (Industrial Sewing and Innovation Center) in Detroit, sees a similar urgency — but frames it around leadership.

“Are we moving fast enough to matter? Are leaders actually leading change, or just participating? Can U.S. manufacturing be competitive again for real?” Vargas Cruz asked.

He expressed concern that industry conversations too often center on frustration rather than execution.

“I find myself in the middle of so many conversations where the name of the game is to complain about the current state of our industry and the lack of support from our government,” he said. “But very few times do we focus on actionable items that will get us to solve those problems as a group.”



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ISAIC works to shorten the distance between innovation and production by piloting emerging technologies in real manufacturing environments. By de-risking adoption and documenting new competencies, the organization focuses on worker elevation rather than replacement.

“We believe in a worker-led culture for continuous improvement,” Vargas Cruz said. “Operators are upskilled by participating firsthand in these pilots and gaining access to new technologies.”

Sean Burke, Director of Business Development at Henderson Machinery Inc., Greensboro, NC, sees growing interest in AI tools to identify bottlenecks and explore expansion opportunities — but he cautions against overreliance.

“Some are taking these AI findings as hard facts while others are doing their due diligence and critically analyzing these reports,” Burke said.

Henderson Machinery aims to be “the first call for those diving deeper into new production practices and expanding their capabilities,” he said. The company is increasingly engaging customers in early product development stages, positioning itself as a strategic partner rather than simply an equipment supplier.

Across these perspectives, one message is consistent: modernization is no longer optional. But technology alone will not determine success — disciplined execution will.

Trade volatility and enforcement concerns

If automation defines the operational side of 2026, trade policy defines its economic reality. Jim Lee, Vice President of Sales at Champion Thread Company, Gastonia, NC, says tariff volatility remains the primary concern for many sewn products manufacturers.

“Tariff volatility directly affects costs, planning cycles and sourcing strategies,” Lee said. “Although conditions have stabilized somewhat in recent months, many companies are still operating cautiously due to uncertainty about future policy shifts.”



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Champion Thread’s response has been deliberate investment — in people, in domestic capabilities and in supply chain resilience.

“We are expanding domestic capabilities and operations to better serve regional markets,” Lee said. “We are also continually strengthening our sourcing network to maintain a resilient, diversified supply chain.”

He emphasized that dependable partnerships matter most during uncertain periods.

“These investments are designed with one goal in mind: helping our customers operate with confidence, even in uncertain environments.”

Brian Moore, President of Unifi Manufacturing, Inc., Greensboro, NC, is focused on enforcement — particularly within the USMCA marketplace.

“As we continue to navigate a challenging marketplace, I think about the challenges facing the USMCA marketplace for apparel and the need for stronger enforcement of existing trade laws on yarn-forward requirements,” Moore said.

He points to what he describes as a measurable compliance gap between imported goods and qualifying regional inputs — a gap that he believes signals widespread use of non-compliant materials.

“This not only harms Unifi’s yarn manufacturing in the U.S. and Central America, but our regional mill customers as well,” Moore said.

Moore also highlights the broader implications.

“It’s important to not only show the impact on the United States textile industry, but to also highlight the revenue losses for the United States government from duties that should be collected,” he said.

For Moore, advocacy in Washington and collaboration with industry partners are essential to protecting regional manufacturing integrity.



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Growth, culture and the human equation

While automation and enforcement dominate headlines, another theme emerged strongly: people.

For Marta Miller, co-founder of Lefty Production Co. (Los Angeles, CA) and Stitch Texas (Austin, TX), the question keeping her up at night is deeply personal.

“What keeps me up at night in 2026 is how to grow my business in a way that truly takes care of the people who helped build it,” Miller said. “I don’t want my team to simply have jobs — I want them to build meaningful, evolving careers.”

She sees responsible growth as a long-term commitment, particularly as team members enter new life stages — marriage, homeownership and parenthood.

“A long-term team brings extraordinary value — loyalty, institutional knowledge, stability, heart, and a sense of family that cannot be replicated. But sustaining that kind of team requires intentional growth, healthy margins and consistent work,” Miller said. “Scaling responsibly means creating an environment where our people can thrive financially and professionally as their lives evolve.”

Miller has committed to maintaining independence and protecting company culture.

“I lost my father this year, and there were days I truly didn’t want to work,” she said. “He helped start these companies, and I still hear his voice reminding me how much people matter — how every team member represents a family counting on us. That perspective keeps me grounded and focused.”

Miller added: “This isn’t just business. I have committed to never selling and never bringing on investors who could compromise our culture. It’s deeply personal to me.”

Her perspective introduces a reminder that modernization and trade enforcement ultimately exist to support something larger: stable careers, strong families and thriving communities.



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A defining year

Taken together, these member perspectives suggest that 2026 is not defined by a single crisis.

It is defined by convergence — of technology, trade and people.

Automation must accelerate — but responsibly. AI must inform — but not dictate. Trade agreements must be enforced. Growth must protect people.

The pressures are real. But so is the resolve.

The question keeping SEAMS leaders up at night is not whether change is coming. It is whether the industry will lead it — with urgency, discipline and shared purpose.