THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

**SEAMS Member Spotlight: Big Duck Canvas**

*In this edition of SEAMS Member Spotlight, Founder and CEO Shawn Mitchell shares the story behind Big Duck Canvas.*

**Company headquarters:** Winder, GA

**Year founded:** 2011

**Number of employees:** 10

**Team members:**

Shawn Mitchell, Founder & CEO; Haylea Williams, Marketing Manager; Lucas Mitchell, COO; Stacey Swancey, Accounts Manager; John Wiemels, Business Development and Project Manager; Laura Mitchell, Customer Advocate; Tyler Harbin, Customer Service Representative; Ty Hester, Jamie Jackson and Dwight Bodden, Warehouse Team.

**For SEAMS members who may not be familiar with Big Duck Canvas, give us an overview of the company and what you do today.**

Big Duck Canvas is a U.S.-based wholesale textile distributor and converter serving manufacturers, established brands, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and individual makers. I founded the company in 2011 to make quality textiles more accessible through transparent volume pricing, flexible purchasing quantities, and useful product knowledge.

Big Duck Canvas operates from a historic industrial building dating to 1940, associated with Winder's textile and garment-making heritage. "We're proud to continue that connection by supplying materials to businesses and makers across the country," said Mitchell.

Cotton canvas remains our foundation, but we also supply nylon, polyester, vinyl, bull denim, linen and specialty fabrics used in sewn products, industrial and institutional applications, outdoor equipment, upholstery and the creative arts. For larger manufacturing clients, we also coordinate custom fabric and finish development directly with mills and finishers, provide converting services and support inventory and logistics programs. We want to be accessible to the startup buying a few yards and dependable to the manufacturer sourcing ongoing production volumes.

**What did you see in the market that convinced you there was an opportunity, and what were the early days like?**

I've been self-employed for most of my adult life. I began in outside electronics sales in 1992, learned how to sell, and eventually started my own business. Around 2002, when my oldest son was born, I earned a web-design certificate and started studying e-commerce and SEO. I even tried selling websites door-to-door. One small-business owner once told me, 'No one will ever buy shoes on a website.' The timing was early, but I never forgot the opportunity.

After the 2008 financial crisis, my electronics business was struggling and I needed a new direction to support my three boys. In 2010, while visiting family in Ohio, a friend suggested selling cornhole boards and bags around the country. I saw an e-commerce business. I started building custom boards and sewing bags, selling on our website and calling on bars and breweries. Orders came quickly, but I was buying cotton duck for our bags at retail prices from Joann and repeatedly clearing out their inventory.

Eventually, I arranged a large fabric purchase from a local supplier. The minimum was more than my little business needed for a year, and I had to give up my only working vehicle to fund it. My idea was to sell the excess online to other cornhole businesses facing the same problem. I built DuckClothWholesale.com.

Those early months were rough. I was going through a difficult divorce, had no permanent home, and a friend let me cut fabric on his pool table. We moved into a storage unit, where I sometimes slept between staying with friends. Then the SEO work began to pay off. Traffic and orders grew. I sold the cornhole business and never looked back.

A turning point came when a manufacturer called needing a thousand yards of a fabric I didn't carry. Looking around at my tiny inventory of 10-ounce cotton duck, I knew I had no obvious way to fulfill it. I took the order, then called suppliers until I found a partner who could help. That experience opened my eyes to the broader textile industry. Within about a year, we crossed our first million dollars in annual sales and moved into a larger warehouse.

Our name came from advice my CPA gave me: "If you want to be a big dog, you've got to act like the big dogs." I reworked our website and brand, and Big Duck Canvas was born.

My biggest lesson was to recognize opportunity where others saw obstacles. Mills and distributors have real reasons for production minimums, but too often the smallest customers are overlooked. I was one of them. Some of those startups become tomorrow's manufacturers. As we grow into bigger accounts and confront those same operating realities, I still want Big Duck to serve both ends of that ecosystem.

**How has the company evolved, and what milestones mattered most?**

Three developments transformed us: expanding beyond our original cotton duck offering, establishing direct relationships with domestic and international mills, and developing our converting and custom textile capabilities.

Customer requests drew us into different canvas weights, weaves and finishes, then into nylon, polyester, vinyl and other materials. Working mill-direct improved our ability to manage specifications, sourcing, cost, and continuity. Today, we coordinate with mills and finishers to develop materials for specific manufacturing requirements rather than limiting customers to what is already on the shelf. E-commerce remains central, but our relationships and technical programs have become much more sophisticated.

**Who is the typical customer, and which markets matter most?**

There really isn't one typical Big Duck customer. On any given day, we might supply an artist, a bag maker, an upholstery business, an institutional buyer, or a manufacturer producing outdoor or industrial goods. That range keeps our team learning.

Larger manufacturing accounts are becoming a substantial and growing part of our revenue. They often need consistent specifications, reliable replenishment, or customized materials. At the same time, we remain committed to the independent makers and emerging brands who helped build the business. Serving both gives us a valuable perspective on how materials move from an initial idea into commercial production.

**Describe your textile portfolio and the materials and finishes most important to customers.**

Cotton canvas is our core, from lightweight ducks to heavyweight numbered ducks, army duck, waxed canvas and artist canvas. Beyond that, we supply nylons, polyesters, vinyl, bull denim, linen and specialty materials for outdoor, tactical, industrial, upholstery, apparel and creative applications.

The bigger story is flexibility. Our stocked products cover many common needs, while our mill and finisher relationships allow us to explore custom constructions, weights, widths, colors, coatings and performance finishes. Customers can work with us on existing materials or on something developed for their production requirements.

**What advantages do your fabric knowledge and direct material access give manufacturers?**

Many customers understand what they want their product to do but don't have a complete fabric specification. We help turn requirements such as breathability, stiffness, softness, color,

or durability into practical options. Sometimes a stocked material is the best solution; other projects warrant a custom construction or finish.

We work directly with mills and finishers on technical needs, samples, development, and production coordination. Direct relationships can improve flexibility, commercial terms, and visibility into supply. Our role is to help customers reach a suitable material efficiently, without pushing custom development when a readily available fabric will do.

**What manufacturing capabilities remain in-house, and why did you expand into them?**

We've worked in product development, pattern making, prototyping, sewing and CNC cutting, and those experiences helped us understand what manufacturers need beyond raw fabric. Today we concentrate on wholesale distribution, converting and custom fabric and finish development. We continue serving a few established cutting customers and selectively accept larger CNC cutting and pattern-making projects; we no longer offer a broad in-house finished-product manufacturing service.

For customers with more complex production needs, we plan to refer them to specialized manufacturers through GoTextiles.com, the separate global sourcing platform I'm developing. We'd rather be clear about what we do best and help customers find the right partner for everything else.

**How do you support a customer from initial sewn-product idea toward production?**

We start with the application. A customer might say the fabric must be breathable, rigid, soft, water-resistant or match a particular color, without having a formal specification. We discuss performance, appearance, production process, expected volume and target cost, then evaluate stocked materials or a custom development path.

We coordinate with our mills and finishers on specifications and sampling where needed. Swatches and cut yardage help customers prototype before committing to production quantities. We can support the material program through replenishment, along with select larger cutting and pattern-making work. Customers or specialist partners handle more complex cut-and-sew production.

**How important is helping startups? Can you share a growth example?**

It's personal to me because Big Duck began as one of those small customers struggling to buy materials at a workable price. I believe the industry can underestimate entrepreneurs whose first purchases are small but whose ideas may become important businesses.

We work with several brands that came to us with little more than a concept. One footwear customer began with small orders and went through several fabric-design iterations with us.

We refined the material for both the finished footwear and its manufacturing process. Today the brand produces a popular product with facilities in the United States and Taiwan. We won't identify the customer without permission, but seeing that kind of growth is one of the most rewarding parts of this work.

**Why has domestic sourcing been important, and how has your U.S.-made offering evolved?**

A healthy domestic textile industry matters for innovation, supply resilience and the manufacturing base. But in my experience, the hardest part of sourcing here often starts before price: visibility. It can be difficult to identify a U.S. mill or finisher, understand its capabilities and know how to begin the conversation. Then come limitations in variety and availability, high minimums, capability gaps and the intimidation smaller buyers feel when information isn't transparent.

We have worked to expand our U.S.-made options and relationships, while recognizing the real economics mills face. As a distributor and converter, we can help aggregate demand and make domestic materials more accessible. To strengthen American manufacturing, we need both competitive capabilities and a supply chain buyers can actually navigate.

**What can you source domestically, and where do you see opportunity?**

Our domestic offerings include select cotton canvas and bull denim, along with certain specialty and performance fabrics, including oxford nylons. We're exploring more substantial stock-program partnerships with U.S. mills for high-demand fabrics that are often difficult to obtain consistently in smaller quantities.

We're particularly interested in cellulosic-fiber constructions for bedding and apparel, reflecting customer interest in comfort, performance and potentially lower-impact material choices. Any environmental benefit needs to be evaluated for the specific fiber and process; these are development opportunities, not established claims or current stock commitments. The commercial test will be reliable quality, repeat demand, workable minimums, and competitive pricing.

**Has interest in U.S.-made fabrics translated into more demand?**

We hear considerable enthusiasm for Made in America, especially from new entrepreneurs, but we have not seen a meaningful overall increase in demand across our offerings. Many customers want a fully U.S.-sourced product yet underestimate the gaps in domestic inputs, production capabilities, labor and cost.

In my view, tariffs can also raise costs for U.S. manufacturers still dependent on imported inputs, making globally competitive finished products harder to produce. I support rebuilding

domestic manufacturing, but enthusiasm alone won't create capacity. We need investments and practical sourcing options that turn interest into repeat purchasing.

**Big Duck works with both domestic and international textile suppliers. How do you help manufacturers evaluate their options, and where do U.S. producers have the strongest advantages?**

America's strengths include innovation, R&D, technical textiles and finishes, defense-related applications and the potential for shorter supply chains. There are extraordinarily capable people in this industry; even after nearly 15 years, I still struggle to keep up with the evolutions and technology.

We weigh more than price per yard: availability, specifications, production minimums, development requirements, logistics and ongoing supply. Domestic production can be particularly attractive for specialized applications and technical collaboration. International sourcing remains practical for other products. I believe America's long-term opportunity is strongest in differentiated, higher-value goods rather than every low-margin commodity category.

**What are the biggest obstacles to manufacturing more sewn products in the United States?**

It comes down to the economics of the entire supply chain: gaps in materials and finishing capabilities, capital investment, production capacity and the availability and cost of skilled labor. We can't rebuild a competitive industry simply by declaring that production should return.

I've heard serious concerns from apparel-industry customers about worker shortages and disruptions associated with immigration enforcement, alongside input-cost pressures and supply interruptions related to tariffs. Those accounts reflect their experience, not an industry-wide measurement, but they deserve attention.

I'd like to see more targeted investment in industrial infrastructure, automation, robotics and practical workforce training. We also need constructive discussion of lawful workforce programs. America's strengths are in advanced materials and higher-value manufacturing. Tariffs alone are not a substitute for making it attractive and feasible to invest and produce here.

**Where do you see the greatest opportunities for domestic textile and sewn-products manufacturing?**

I believe automation will be a major catalyst for reshoring, especially when applied to higher-value products, premium brands and specialized industrial or technical goods. Automated cutting, robotics and new sewing technologies could change the economics of some domestic

production, although flexible fabric handling remains difficult and the technology is not equally mature for every application.

But equipment alone isn't enough. Producers also need fabrics, components, finishes and technical partners that can support modern manufacturing. We should build on our strengths in research, innovation, specialized materials and fast technical collaboration. The goal isn't to recreate every factory of the past; it's to make American manufacturing more productive and competitive.

**How important are domestic partners, and what would strengthen the supply chain?**

Our relationships with mills, finishers, converters and manufacturers are fundamental. I'd like to see more meaningful partnerships between domestic mills and distributors to create viable stock programs. Mills need efficient production volumes; microfactories and smaller manufacturers need lower minimums, dependable replenishment, and access to materials without excessive inventory commitments.

Distributors can help aggregate demand across many buyers, develop common specifications with mills, hold inventory, and offer smaller releases. That could make production more predictable for mills and domestic sourcing more practical for manufacturers. Stronger visibility into capabilities and earlier technical collaboration would improve the system as well.

**What changes are you seeing in demand, order sizes, or customer needs?**

Since the tariffs took effect, we've seen a decline in average order value among customers of different sizes. Government-contractor purchasing has been a notable exception, trending upward. At the same time, we've seen a slight increase in inquiries from businesses seeking alternatives after supply-chain disruptions.

That combination is revealing: more companies are looking for sourcing solutions, but many are committing to smaller purchases. We can't attribute every change to tariffs alone, yet the pattern suggests caution around inventory and cash flow. It reinforces the value of flexible quantities, reliable stocked materials and multiple sourcing relationships.

**What role does e-commerce play, and how has it changed access to wholesale textiles?**

E-commerce is why Big Duck exists. In 2011 we were early in offering searchable wholesale fabrics online with visible volume-based pricing and the option to buy small quantities or production yardage. Our SEO investment let us reach people who might otherwise have needed existing industry relationships just to find a supplier.

More textile businesses have improved their websites since then, but many capable mills and suppliers remain difficult to discover online, with weak search visibility and confusing buying

experiences. That persistent gap is a key reason I'm co-founding GoTextiles.com, a separate sourcing platform focused on supplier discovery and industry connections. The tools are changing, including AI-assisted discovery, but the opportunity is familiar: remove barriers between buyers and capable suppliers.

**What products or services might surprise even longtime customers?**

Many customers know us for stocked cotton canvas and don't realize we support custom material programs for larger manufacturers. We coordinate custom fabric constructions, colors and finishes with mills and finishers, then can warehouse produced goods under blanket orders. Customers receive scheduled or as-needed releases and are invoiced as those shipments occur, rather than taking the full quantity at once.

These programs help clients maintain consistent materials while managing production schedules, storage, and working capital. We also provide converting and selectively take on larger CNC cutting and pattern-making work. It's a different level of support from a straightforward online fabric purchase.

**What are the biggest priorities for the next several years?**

First, we want to carry more inventory in our core lines and reduce stockouts. A strong product assortment doesn't help a manufacturer if the material isn't available when needed. Second, we're developing variations of our core offerings — special constructions, colors and finishes — to make our stock programs more distinctive and useful.

Third, we want to keep growing alongside emerging brands with custom-development, blanket-order, and replenishment programs. Our motto is ‘Helping Businesses Succeed.’ It's not just a slogan; it's the lens through which I want to judge our growth.

**What attracted you to SEAMS, and what value do you see in the association?**

One thing I've learned in nearly 15 years is how much I still don't know about this industry. I came in without a conventional textile background. I saw a gap in distribution, built a company around it, and came to appreciate just how deep the knowledge and innovation are in textiles.

SEAMS offers a welcoming place to learn from people who have spent their careers making and advancing these products. I also want deeper relationships with domestic mills, finishers and manufacturers. My route into the industry was unusual, but I think the perspective of someone who built a business around access for smaller buyers has value. SEAMS encourages me to step outside my comfort zone, learn, collaborate, and contribute.

**Is there anything else SEAMS members should know about Big Duck, your team, or your commitment?**

When I look back on this journey, I get emotional. Against some long odds, after mistakes and difficult pivots, we're still here. What I'm proudest of isn't the revenue or even the company itself. It's the people who built it with me.

Our team has worked incredibly hard through every challenge. They care fiercely about our customers, celebrate when we help someone succeed, and take it personally when we fall short. They're family to me. Haylea Williams is a wonderful example: after 14 years with Big Duck, she's contributed across many roles, helped us communicate with and support customers, and remains deeply invested in the people behind every order. Her perspective helped shape this interview, too.

Now my middle son, Lucas, is growing into his leadership role and preparing to eventually take the reins. It's extraordinary to think that a business I began while trying to support three young boys may become something the next generation carries forward.

Our motto is “Helping Businesses Succeed,” but the truth is an awful lot of people — our employees, customers, suppliers and industry partners — helped us succeed. That's something I'll never take for granted.