



Ron Brittain

Ron Brittain, owner of L&R Knitting, several years took measure of market trends and didn't see a future in commodity goods as a greige mill operator.

That decision is the reason he's still in business today, he says.

"Because of the market conditions over the last 12 years, I saw that commodity goods was not a good place to be," Brittain says.

Realizing that niche markets appeared to be trend for his business, Brittain began gearing up his business toward those markets. He purchased equipment that would make his operation more versatile.

"It's the only reason we're still in business," she said.

Brittain has been in hosiery-related business since working with his father in a dye-tube operation in which they were working to help eliminate waste in dyeing polyester yarn.

When an oil embargo put a damper on that business, Brittain said he decided to learn how to make socks.

Brittain has seen his share of trends during his 35 years of business.

He's convinced that hosiery operations that do not extend their versatility may be facing tough times ahead.

"I've watched a lot of mills disappear that just concentrated on the basics," he says.

As far as the economic-political landscape that has been redefin-

ing the hosiery industry, Brittain doesn't believe any one entity is responsible for the global business environment that companies today must compete in.

"It's been coming for a long time," he says. "Once consumers got a taste of cheap prices, they wanted more. Once retailers got a taste of bigger profits, they saw a potential for more."

Just as Brittain some time ago realized the writing on the wall, he believes hosiery operations – particularly greige mills such as his own – must adapt to the changing landscape by diversifying their businesses.

In an industry where many jobs were lost to technology and now others to outsourcing, Brittain says companies must continue to improve efficiency and competitiveness.

"Lean and mean," he says.

L&R Knitting currently employs 15 people and also some occasional contract work.

His wife, Lorie, serves as company administrator, and his daughter, Angie Ward, serves as yarn procurement specialist.



Lorie Brittain

## 'Creative Class' Personnel Could Mandate Our Future

In his intriguing book, "The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life," author-economist Richard Florida has another vision for the brave, new world of the future.

In a nutshell, Dr. Florida says that successful organization – perhaps including hosiery companies – will be driven by people who put intellect, judgment, and creative sensibilities into their careers.

Companies, cities, regions and nations face challenges that are critical to their ultimate health and well-being, Florida observes. They will depend on the "creative class," roughly 40 million people, to lead the transformation into a successful competitive entity.

The term "creative class" itself refers to idea or innovation-based occupations, such as lawyers, engineers, and artists. But he argues it also includes designers, marketers, and out-of-the-box executives who can lead the companies to 21st century business strategies.

Those communities that attract creative people will have to offer more than latte bars, Florida advises. He talks about an environment that must have the "three Ts for economic growth – Tolerance, Talent and Technology."

Tolerance, he says, is an openness to new ideas, new opportunities, and diversity. (Would a hosiery executive argue against the value of such?) They compliment the talent and the technology essential to efficiency of any company.

But don't expect the creative class personnel to stick around too long. "People whose creative skills are in high demand are especially mobile; their skills and the law of supply and demand allow them to be," he continues.

Looking specifically at the manufacturing sector, Florida notes that people who make things have changed. "The workforce driving factories is no longer always a blue collar worker like my dad, but often people who write software code..."

Some factories now already are a "living laboratory" where workers, researchers, designers, and technicians work together to automate, monitor, improve and motivate the production process, Florida continues. "Materials and dematerialization--and all the people who oversee these processes--go together."

Far-fetched for hosiery manufacturing?

"Not at all," responds Dan St. Louis, manager of the Hosiery Technology Center.

"Retailers are insisting they want vendors to bring them innovative products....reducing turnaround time requires new strategies....marketing is getting products to consumers before they know they want them."

Challenges of the future are going to require creative concepts for responses. That means more emphasis on creative employees, St. Louis insists.