

A marriage OF FIBER AND MACHINE

Propelled by technology in the machine and fiber industries, enthusiasm for seamless apparel is far from waning and it's an area in which some hosiery manufacturers are finding shelter from squeezed profit margins.

Consider a product line that includes underwear, swimwear, sportswear, outerwear, homewear and medical-wear. Now consider fibers that stretch, shed moisture, inhibit bacteria, insulate, soften and repel stains.

Combine the two categories and you begin to get an idea how diverse a range of new apparel products are possible – a marriage made in fashion heaven.

Now add large diameter circular knitting machines whose concept originated with hosiery products but can now knit everything in the above-mentioned products category – and more.

It's easy to see why there is continued enthusiasm in the seamless apparel market.

Some hosiery manufacturers are cashing in on the excitement.

Seamless garments are the fastest growing part of the intimate apparel business and could account for 50 percent of the industry's \$12 billion in sales within the next 10 years, according to Tefron, an Israel-based company recognized as a pioneer and leader

in the production of seamless apparel.

For a hosiery manufacturer positioned to enter the seamless apparel business, many industry observers believe the potential for success is profound.

The possibilities for new product offerings are limitless, says one Canadian hosiery manufacturing executive who attended a PAM Trading seamless apparel show in January.

In December at a Carolina Hosiery Association Supplier Meeting, Acme-McCrory President Bill Redding described his company's seamless apparel division as "a good fit." Acme-McCrory also partners with Wells Hosiery in Asheboro, N.C., for a line of seamless apparel from Wells.

In Hudson, N.C., Cahaj Corp. has almost doubled its workforce due to its seamless apparel business.

Seamless apparel being produced on knitting machines of course is not new.

American, European and Asian companies have been producing seamless apparel on circular knitting machines for several years.

But as the makers of large diameter circular knitting machines – primarily Santoni and Sangiacomo – have advanced their machines' seamless capabilities, it has opened new doors for seamless apparel manufacturers.

Machine makers reportedly are banking on selling more machines through those doors.

Recent figures from market leader Santoni show that the explosion in the seamless apparel phenomena is set to continue, according to

a July article in Knitting International.

Bobby Irvin, president of Henderson Machinery Inc. which sells Sangiacomos, says he believes seamless technology is something some hosiery manufacturers may want to take a second look at.

"It's definitely an option for some," said Irvin, who has placed a large number of Sangiacomo's "Jumbo" machines in West Coast hosiery manufacturers that began



Sample of seamless apparel knitted on a Sangiacomo machine.

developing a seamless business several years ago when the fine-gauge hosiery business there started a slide.

Part of the continued excitement about seamless apparel comes from the marriage of the machine technology and the technological advances in the fiber and yarn industry.

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seamless

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Antimicrobial fibers have been applied in certain apparel segments – particular hosiery and other medical wear segments – for some time.

But as the technology in seamless knitting machines now allows the seamless knitting of bras, underwear, T-shirts and other shirts, applications for antimicrobial fibers for those products have been realized especially for the sports apparel market.

For example, an odor-free undershirt or even outerwear garment for athletes can now be produced on the large diameter-knitting machine.

And that's only one example of how fiber and yarn technology is being applied to seamless apparel.

Fiber companies are equally excited about the expected continued growth in seamless apparel.

And for good reason. "We have more than 100 different yarns at any given time," says Albert Werner, vice president of Wertex Group, a hosiery manufacturer based in Toronto, Canada.

Nilit innovation is at the very core, at the very "fiber" of our company," says Amy Holzer, communications director for Nilit. "From the individual polymers to the finished yarns, innovation is what drives Nilit.

"Our innovative Sensil fibers have pushed microfibers one giant step forward in a fast-paced, competitive world.



Samples of seamless garments knitted on a Santoni machine were on display at a PAM Trading Corp. show in January.

Holzer said Nilit's in-house R&D center has developed cutting-edge technological solutions in the development of customized yarns for its customers, making Nilit a leader in the field.

"Working closely with knitters, designers, and retailers to achieve high-quality solutions, Nilit is able to meet specific manufacturing needs and requirements," he said.

"The Sensil brand of specialty fibers, meets the demands in circular and seamless knitting. For designers, knitters, producers, and retailers, Sensil provides a family of advanced yarns for today's activewear, bodywear, hosiery, and intimate apparel while keeping an ever-watchful eye on tomorrow's trends."

Daryl Garner, sales manager with DynaYarn USA, also sees the emerging trend of partnering new fiber and yarn technology with machine technology. For a smaller company, Garner said the ability to offer such innovation is a strong suit for DynaYarn.

"With our equipment and capabilities, we're able to put together yarn

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for new and innovative applications,” says Garner.

Look for more innovation out of the fiber and yarn segment as those innovations will continue to enhance machine capabilities for the development of new products.

Unifi last May announced a partnership with Peabody, Mass.-based Saucony Inc.’s HIND division to introduce two sport bras – the Motion Sensor Bra and the Proactive Bra – featuring Unifi’s Sorbtek moisture-management yarn. It also teamed up with Marmot Mountain Ltd., Santa Rosa, Calif., to produce Marmot’s Infinity Baselayer collection featuring BacteriaStat with unifi’s A.M.Y. antimicrobial yarns.

David Darwin, Hyosung’s senior marketing director for North America, cites his company’s antimicrobial spandex as one example of Hyosung fiber application in the seamless apparel market.

Already Darwin has seen a host of new concepts in seamless brought about through technology in the fiber industry, particularly moisture control, micro deniers and antimicrobial fibers. He foresees the trend to continue.

Darwin believes the seamless apparel is best suited for companies looking for niche and specialty markets because of the fashion aspect of the business.

“As trends change quickly, they’ve got to supply garments close to the markets,” he said.

The importance of being able to supply fashion markets quickly was the focus of comments from a Sangiacomo executive in a July 2004 Knitting International article. Although the comments were directed toward European retailers, the implications for U.S. seamless manufacturers is obvious.

Sangiaco’s area sales manager, Fulvio Bosio, says that he is far from convinced that China can respond to European and U.S. market requirements for certain seamless products. “In terms of fashion and delivery, the quicker the fashion changes, the better it is for seamless producers in Italy and Europe,” he commented.

Alan Parker, executive vice president of PAM Trading Corp., witnessed the enthusiasm over seamless apparel at a Santoni seamless show last month.

Parker said the show drew participants from California, Canada, Maine, Alabama, North and South Carolina and other locales.

“It was a good indication of the type of business that is out for seamless apparel in the United States,” he said. “It’s out there and it’s growing.”

Fashion dictates the seamless market and its an area of fashion that changes constantly. Instead of four floor sets a year, Shelley says retailers now are thinking in terms of eight a year.

Manufacturers of seamless wear must meet those fashion demands with innovative and creative offerings for the retailers.



Seamless garments at Cahaj Corp.

“It’s a moving target,” says Shelly, who at times travels twice a week to New York for marketing purposes.

Despite the challenges that seamless apparel can present, Shelley believes its an avenue other hosiery manufacturers could take advantage of as global price pressure is expected to continue.

“It definitely has potential,” he says. “We saw it here and we’ve been fortunate in our ability to develop that potential.”

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