

center to focus on testing and product development

by BRENT CHILDERS, Editor



Bill Poplin

The N.C. Center for Applied Textile Technology in Belmont is structuring itself to become an even greater asset to the industry in meeting tomorrow's challenges and one area that has risen to the top of its agenda is research and development.

As many textile manufacturers position themselves to remain competitive in today's global marketplace, they realize research and development will play a crucial role in their business strategies.

But as some have faced another reality of offshore competition – slimmer profit margins – they often find they do not have resources to fund such development and in fact many may have to cut back on research and development budgets.

It's a catch-22 – the need for more product and development at a time when resources to meet those needs may have to be funneled elsewhere.



Determining the make-up of knitted or woven products is one service that the textile center's laboratory staff provide to manufacturers and they are finding it a valuable service with markets plague with imports that may or may not be what they're billed as.

The textile center is poised to play a greater role in helping manufacturers meet that challenge as it is broadening its role in assisting companies transform innovation into new or improved products.

Sample production is an area in which the center can play a valuable role, says Director Gwen Perkins.

As more apparel and other manufacturers are seeking specialized markets to avoid the pitfalls of today's commodity markets, sampling potential customers with new or improved products is paramount.

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Most manufacturers can attest to that fact by the amount of samples being delivered in any given week. "I'm running samples every day," said one hosiery manufacturer.

And any yarn or fiber producer knows the difficulties of running 50 pounds of product – finding a slot to run it is a challenge in itself considering the amount of time requested.

With equipment already in place, the textile center can run those smaller samples – and more importantly – can have it back in the hands of the manufacturer in a couple of days.

Perkins sees the center expanding its role in this area as more manufacturers rely on specialty markets to increase their profit margins.

The center is working to obtain the sample processing equipment that will allow it to run even smaller samples – 25 pounds or less.

Dan St. Louis, director of the Hosiery Technology Center, sees the development of the textile center's sample production capabilities as a major advantage for his clients.

The Hosiery Technology Center in Hickory for several months has been

working to develop a partnership with the textile center in Belmont. St. Louis is serving on an advisory board that is working to retool and expand the textile center's role as an industry resource.



Parkdale Mills recently donated a mini carding machine that will assist the textile center in its sample processing program.

"It will be huge," St. Louis said of the textile center's ability to process a range of small samples for hosiery manufacturers

and other manufacturers within the textile industry supply chain.

St. Louis offered an example of a manufacturer that needed a sample batch of yarn but was going to have to wait six weeks before the yarn manufacturer could deliver the small quantity.

As the sample could be produced with equipment already in place at the textile center, St. Louis said the manufacturer was able to obtain the sample within two days.

"It's all about speed to market," St. Louis said. "You can have the best hosiery product ever known to man but it doesn't do you much good if you can't get it out there and quick."

Bill Poplin, assistance director at the textile center, says he has seen an uptick over the last several months in requests for product development.

"There is definitely a need," Poplin emphasizes.

While the advantages of faster sampling to manufacturers producing the end-product are evident, Poplin said the textile center's

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ability to produce sample yarn and fibers can alleviate some of the sampling demands on the yarn and fiber producers.

"There's a lot of down-time involved when running a small sample," he reminded.

Poplin said the center recently received a mini-carder from Parkdale Mills which will become another component in the center's sample processing equipment. He said that piece of equipment should be operational within three to four months.

The center currently is engaged in obtaining other equipment components of a full sample processing system. If the efforts are successful, officials expect all the components to be up and running by the end of year.

In addition to the sample processing, Perkins said another feature of the textile center's product development capabilities is assistance provided by the center's testing labs.

The center's number of requests for testing has been growing, she said, as many companies seek to conduct independent analysis of testing performed by private firms.

As the market has been flooded with overseas products, Perkins says the center's testing clientele will continue to grow as companies seek to become more aggressive in analyzing the yarn and fabric components to confirm what is being shipped into the U.S. as a product with a specific makeup indeed contain those specified components.

"A lot of companies are looking at imported goods to make sure they are what the overseas manufacturers say they are," she said.

The textile center's labs also assist companies in defect analysis, she said. If a particular product isn't performing as it should, the center's lab can break down the item and determine where the problem exists, and equally important, how to correct it.

In the same area of product testing, Perkins says she sees the center's role in testing for retailers also expanding.

Following a similar program by the Hosiery Technology Center, Perkins said the center staff is working on developing an "Introduction to Textiles for Retailers" in which retailers can spend a day learning about the different components in textile industry supply chain.

The goal she said will be to forge a close alliance with retailers.

sampling

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Groce said everyone knows that most any domestic manufacturer can't compete against the cheap labor in the overseas market and that is why specialty markets – where quality and timely deliveries are paramount over the cheapest price – are taking on such an importance.

Groce said the textile center will play a greater role in helping manufacturers capitalize on those specialty market characteristics.

"They (textile center staff) see the need and they are up to the challenge," he said.

Groce said the center has also assisted him testing fabric performance.

That seems to be a topic with a renewed sense of urgency.

One eastern N.C. hosiery manufacturer, when informed about the textile center's yarn testing services, said he had an issue in which the make-up of an overseas product obviously wasn't what it was being labeled as.

"I'm going to give them (center) a call," he said. "In fact, I may drive down there (Belmont) tomorrow."

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