

manufacturers see sampling and product development as key assets

by BRENT CHILDERS, Editor



Mike Gross, director of product development at Carolina Mills, and Allen Hooper, manager at the company's plant No. 8, walk between long rows of spinning equipment. Small sample runs means putting much of the equipment on down time which makes it difficult to deliver timely sample orders. The textile center currently can turn small samples much faster and hopes to enhance that capability soon with additional machinery.

The N.C. Center for Applied Textile Technology's Advisory Board on Friday, April 15, approved a strategic plan that will serve as a road map for the center going forward with its mission to serve as a resource for the textile industry with two primary objectives – assisting in training a world-class workforce and helping the industry bring innovation to a global market.

The textile center has long been recognized as an invaluable workforce training resource. In the April issue of *Legwear Trends*, industry executives from across the state testified to the center's importance as a tool to help their employees adapt to a changing workplace.

Equally important, perhaps even more so today, is the more focused emphasis that the textile center plans to place on testing and product development.

Manufacturing executives know that fact better than anyone.

Steve Dobbins, president and CEO of Carolina Mills in Maiden, N.C., said the center's capabilities in testing and product development will be invaluable to the industry.

With continued pressure from a flood of

imports after the lifting of quotas in January, Dobbins said there is also a sense of urgency involved.

"Innovation is allowing us to come up with some new and exciting products," he said. "We've got to be able to get those products out there as soon as we can."

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With sampling being one of the first avenues to market new products, that is a segment of production in which the center has been a valuable partner for Carolina Mills, says Michael Groce, president of Carolina Mills Maiden.

Groce gave an example of how the textile center recently assisted in getting samples of a new product out to a hosiery manufacturer that will soon be showcasing the product in a new line of socks.

Due to the small quantity of material

needed in the sampling, it would have proved difficult for his plants to process such a small amount in the time it was needed.

"The textile center worked very well with us on that project," he said.

Groce cited another case in which he actually performed a performance test. He

gave the textile center a sample order and he gave one of his own plants the same order. The textile center had the sample out in two weeks less than his own plant.

The only problem, Groce said, was that both set of samples inadvertently were sent to the manufacturer:

"I told him we probably sent him enough yarn to do his entire run," Groce mused, adding that the manufacturer replied that he wasn't going to be returning any of it.

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product development

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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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