

Quick-Learners Develop Model For Hosiery Future

In 1986, a young couple with no ties to North Carolina and no experience in hosiery manufacturing walked into a small greige mill they had just purchased in Hickory.

The equipment was as old as the previous owners who were ready to retire. But Kevin and Susan Huitt were not deterred. Today they are the owners of a company with 70 employees and \$7 million a year in business. They also are acquiring new technology, confident that domestic U.S. hosiery mills can have a future.



Kevin and Susan Huitt

Behind the success -- and profits -- is a lean organization. The owners answer the telephone when necessary. All the office personnel are part-time and the office layout is almost Spartan. Plant managers in Hickory and North Wilkesboro have production jobs also. But there is no company debt or cost associated with leveraged financing.

Over 70 Uniplet machines dominate the Hickory knitting operations which soon will include Sangiacomo equipment. The 25,000 square foot North Wilkesboro operations is home to Lonati machines. The company also employs toe-closing and seaming personnel, but all finishing is contracted.

Huitt does not sell greige products. Some 90 percent of the business is contract work for large vertical mills, including Gold Toe and Moretz Inc., but all shipments are finished goods. Direct sales account for about 10 percent of annual revenue.

N.C. Socks Inc., headed by Dennis Martin, and Nu-Sox Finishing Inc. owned by Michael Banks, are contract finishers for Huitt Mills and together they form a tight network. Huitt has almost no inventory. Shipments go out daily and finished production is on the docks within five days after yarn comes in the doors.

"I have to learn hard on my suppliers sometimes," Huitt reflects.

Dan St. Louis, manager of the Hosiery Technology Center, says Huitt Mills is a model. "They have a good niche and they run a lean and efficient company," he says.

Kevin Huitt describes his niche as a "fill-in company." The mill is ready to move quickly when his customers, larger vertical mills, need



Huitt Mill's Knitting Room

to supplement their own production to meet requirements of their retailers.

Susan Huitt brings her creative talent to the direct sales side of the business, including licensees of Ralph Lauren and Oshkosh. "I enjoy working with up and coming designers looking for something different... something unique," she reflects.

She prefers helping customer develop a product with quality but yet price competitive.



Huitt Mills makes a variety of socks including athletic, boot, hunting, casual, and dress socks.

A major change that has occurred in the almost two decades as hosiery producer is the consolidation among retailers. Relationships that used to exist in sales have been replaced by price-driven demands, Susan Huitt says.

The Huitts have directed some of their marketing efforts to the company website huitt.com. Products, the company policies and philosophies, and the story of the company's development all are featured. The site also is linked to Legsource.com, the industry's website maintained by the Hosiery Technology Center.

Looking ahead five years, the Huitts believe their will be more sourcing from overseas. "There will not be major growth in hosiery manufacturing jobs, but the industry will not disappear," Kevin Huitt concludes.

Nor will Huitt Mills disappear, it seems. "We adapt ourselves to the market... we are small enough to move fast and stay focused on service," Kevin Huitt insists.

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