




Contract sewing company CustomFab USA employs more than 250 skilled laborers who fabricate products for leading medical, military, sports and luggage companies. The company's investment in computerized sewing equipment ensures consistent quality and delivery. Photo: CustomFab USA.

735.4255
JBGLOVE.COM

SEWING AND REAPING

Persistence translates to profits for the U.S. sewn-goods industry, despite the ongoing problem of finding and training skilled employees.



When U.S. textile jobs started to leave en masse for China and other cheap-labor countries in the 1990s, an entire industry scrambled to pick up the pieces. Companies that survived the upheaval frequently shared one common trait: adaptability. Some contract sewers courted niche non-apparel product makers, while others invested in equipment to become leaders in high-tech fabric finishing.

Although the consumer apparel market is unlikely to stage a full comeback in the United States, new opportunities in commercial and industrial sewing continue to emerge for sewing equipment manufacturers and contract sewers alike. To stay profitable in a constantly evolving and continually challenging industry, companies in the sewn-goods market are employing several key strategies.

Go with the flow

The Fox Co., a distributor of sewing, cutting and spreading equipment in Charlotte, N.C., found itself in a precarious position after the exodus of apparel from the United States. “We dealt almost exclusively with American companies in the apparel industry, and lost a majority of our customer base either to closing down or moving offshore,” says Harry Berzack, president of The Fox Co. “We basically had to reinvent ourselves.”

That meant becoming involved in home furnishings, parachutes, industrial textiles, filtration—or, as Berzack puts it, “anything that can be sewn.”

In addition to apparel, mass-produced items like sheets and pillowcases, along with some awnings and window treatments, have gone offshore. Much of the work ends up in Mexico and Central America. The Fox Co. has a fully staffed stocking facility in Honduras, “but we still do a good proportion of our business onshore,” Berzack says.

One area experiencing growth in the United States is the medical industry, which is making products like gauze, splints and compression hosiery. In comparison to the height of the U.S. apparel industry, however, Berzack says “growth” is a relative term. For example, a T-shirt factory may buy 200 sewing machines; medical and other non-apparel specialties require many fewer machines because of smaller production runs.

“You also have to be a lot more specialized,” says Berzack. “Medical fabrics have different construction, and you need more knowledge about the machines because they have special add-ons.”

From custom to customer

A flexible approach to contract sewing has helped Jonco Industries Inc., Milwaukee, Wis., navigate the decline of sewing manufacturing in the U.S. The company is currently manufacturing custom tool pouches and toolbox covers, school uniforms, hats, specialty backpacks, car seat covers and changing blankets.

“We do a lot of work with businesses, but a large part of our growth comes from people at home who have ideas they want to go forward with,” says operations manager Jim Kittle.



As a custom sewing shop, Jonco Industries manufactures a range of products, including these specialty T-shirts. With fewer people now wanting to learn how to sew, Jonco has found a temporary employment agency that supplies the company with workers willing to learn the trade. Photo: Jonco Industries.

Building solid foundations

The relationship between a business and its suppliers is as critical as its relationship with customers, and it needs to be dependable. "Once a supplier commits to a delivery date, we rely on them to adhere to that," says Jim Kittle, operations manager at Jonco Industries Inc. "A perfect supplier is a reliable on-time supplier who also gives us a fair price."

The same goes for the equipment. "A perfect sewing machine is a reliable sewing machine, one that does not require hours of tune-up work daily," Kittle says.

Just as a business relies on its suppliers for quality and timeliness, that business can also take steps to become a better customer. By regularly keeping suppliers in the loop on relevant business activities, such as personnel changes, ideas for new products and important timeframes, a business can ensure a smoother relationship with its manufacturing partner.

Always remember this important guideline: "It's the personality of the company, or the company culture and its people, that we're really doing business with at the end of the day," says Don Alhanati, founder of CustomFab USA.

Roeming Industries, Mequon, Wis., also has found a niche in turning entrepreneurs' concepts into reality.

"I get calls from people all the time asking if we can help with a product they'd like to sell online, and we make prototypes for them," says president Sandy Schumaker.

One such entrepreneur is Daniel Roeming, grandson of Roeming Industries' founder. Roeming wanted to make life easier for his wife, who was doing in-home clothing shows and had to haul a heavy, sharp-edged rolling rack. Roeming collaborated with Schumaker (his aunt) and head seamstress Ruth Karrels to design a bag to carry the rack. Schumaker found a lightweight yet durable fabric, long zippers and webbing for the adjustable strap. After several alterations and trial runs, the bag made its debut on Amazon in 2017.

Cut-and-sew equipment manufacturers are also heeding customers' calls for well-made custom products. Berzack recently met with someone who wanted to make high-end polo shirts that would sell for upwards of \$200 apiece. In fact, Berzack forecasts an increase in specialized, boutique-type operations making high-quality specialized goods that require high-speed, high-tech machines.

Companies that offer their customers choices and respond to an increased demand for customization will have a better chance of staying in business, says Joe Eller, vice president of JUKI America Inc., Miami, Fla.



Roeming Industries has a team of talented, dedicated sewers but recognizes the shortage of skilled labor in the industry. President Sandy Schumaker heads up The Makers Coalition of Southeastern Wisconsin, with the goal of raising awareness and providing education about production sewing as a career. Photo: Roeming Industries.

DO IT YOURSELF.



**VISIT US AT
EXPO BOOTH 1166**



**PROFESSIONAL GRADE
PRODUCTS**

APCO

Proudly made in the USA.

OR WE'LL DO IT FOR YOU.



TWO CHOICES. ONE CALL. 800 542 3009

APCO Cleaners and Protectors have set the standard for effectiveness and are highly recommended by many of the leading producers and distributors of industrial fabrics. Ongoing research and development ensures that APCO will continue to be a leader in producing professional quality products with an eye on "going greener."

Designed, formulated and used by people who live to maintain outdoor fabrics.

For more information, call us at (877) 877-APCO
or visit www.apcoproducts.com and www.cleancanvas.com



Technology as recruiting tool

While automation serves as one possible way to alleviate the ongoing shortage of skilled employees, many companies find it too cost-prohibitive. Even if a contract sewer or an end product manufacturer largely automates its sewing systems, someone still needs to maintain and repair the machines.

Harry Berzack, president of The Fox Co., believes that the opportunity to work on high-tech equipment could be a selling point to today's young workers. "They want to be involved in computers and programming," he says. "Technology appeals to them."

Smaller operations might not be able to afford or justify a full-time mechanic to maintain their machines. That responsibility could fall to the equipment distributor or manufacturer. "We are doing our best to educate new people about sewing so we have the caliber of staff that can take care of our customers' equipment," Berzack says.



"Customization could mean custom sizing, possibly by use of body-scanning technology, or simply custom color and fabric selection," Eller says. "Successful companies will offer these options with quick delivery, as their customers will want it now. It will require new skills in supply chain management and understanding of the various technologies available today."

An automated approach

Digitalization and automation of the sewing industry are influencing companies to increase speed and efficiency while reducing errors and production costs in a highly competitive market. "Automation is always important, particularly when quality and productivity can both be improved above the level of using standard machines," Eller says.

Today's automation most often revolves around programmable machines and job-specific clamping. "These machines allow the customer to achieve a quality level that is not possible with manual machines, and to eliminate human error in the process," Eller says.

He also encourages factories to take advantage of any available technology "to quickly change from one product to another and to monitor the factory production in real time so management can make changes quickly if necessary."

JUKI America's newest models include digital adjustment for tension, stitch length, feeding characteristics and other options, depending upon a customer's product requirements.

Doug Glenn, vice president of sales at Consew Consolidated Sewing Machine Corp. in Carlstadt, N.J., says that automation can be an ergonomic tool that assists rather than fully replaces the operator.

"In some applications in the automotive and other industries, operators stand at the machines, which are waist-level or above and have remote pedals," Glenn says. "In other applications, operators are in the seated position and can place their sewn products on a conveyor belt above or beside when they are finished sewing." These setups also offer a simple way to increase production through material handling and work flow.

To attain the most value from automation, however, many companies want to automate as much of the sewing process as possible. In one industry example, Consew provides a machine for parachute makers that automatically takes a piece of webbing off the reel and measures and hot cuts it to length, folds the webbing onto itself, and then sews down to 12 inches, stops and trims.



WANT MORE? WE HAVE IT!
Search **sewing technology** at
www.SpecialtyFabricsReview.com

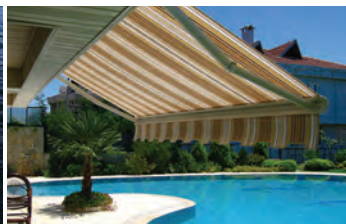


Help your customers tell their own story with Tempotest fabric.

Tempotest® has the widest selection of colors and patterns, adding a touch of elegance and flair to any project. Nearly a century of our authentic Italian style has resulted in a stunning collection of outdoor colors and patterns from big and bold to subtle and serene, and everything in between. Help your customers add style and exceptional performance to their favorite land, sea and home locales with Tempotest®.

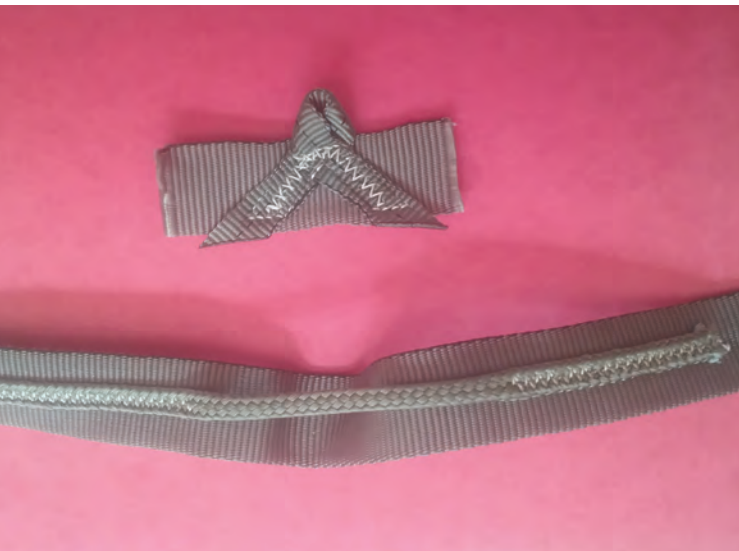


Exclusive distributor of Tempotest
Awning and Marine Fabrics
800-543-0448



Visit us at the
IFAI EXPO
Booth #1301

Digitalization and automation of the sewing industry are influencing companies to increase speed and efficiency while reducing errors and production costs in a highly competitive market.



This sewing application from the parachute industry relied on material handling automation and sewing automation with very little human participation. Automating the process yielded better quality and consistency, along with an increase in productivity. Photo: Consew Consolidated Sewing Machine Corp.

This creates a sewn, metered webbing loop that is applied to the parachute canopy.

“To do this manually, you would need a strip cutter, and then you would bring all those pieces over to an operator who would line everything up and sew with a double-needle machine,” Glenn says. “Automation can make a more consistent finished product and greatly increase production without having operators.”

Embracing technology can provide a competitive advantage. At its new 70,000-square-foot facility in Garden Grove, Calif., CustomFab USA has heavily invested in computerized sewing machines, enterprise resource planning (ERP) manufacturing software and automated cutting equipment to fabricate a wide range of soft goods for the medical, tactical gear, aerospace, and sports and fashion industries.

“Over the years we’ve seen a major leap forward with regard to the equipment becoming more versatile; that is, being able to automate and handle larger quantities of more specific types of materials,” says Don Alhanati, founder of CustomFab USA. “The technological upgrades we’ve implemented help with speed, performance and consistency.”

Thanks to the increase in productivity afforded by automation, CustomFab USA has been able to “significantly scale up our output without needing to scale outward too much in terms of our geological footprint.”

Alhanati expects automation to play an even more important role moving forward, as it allows for greater output at a faster pace. “It’s the future of manufacturing, and we’ve positioned ourselves to be at the cutting edge of the movement,” he says.

Help wanted

By the early 2000s, the American textile industry appeared dead in the water. But thanks to a bit of re-shoring and new product development in the United States, the commercial/industrial sewing industry now has positions to fill. The only trouble is finding workers with the skills—or the desire to learn the skills—to operate and maintain sewing equipment.

“We are now on our third generation of sewing machine operators, cutting machine people, pattern makers and mechanics who have lost their jobs and found something else to do,” Glenn says. “That leaves us with a real shortage of skilled labor.”

A fundamental problem in acquiring sewing talent is lack of awareness. “People don’t know that production sewing is a viable career path,” says Schumaker.

She encountered this predicament firsthand when The Makers Coalition of Southeastern Wisconsin worked with Milwaukee Area Technical College to offer a class on industrial sewing. “We couldn’t find people to take the class,” says Schumaker, noting that the coalition is trying to find new ways to raise awareness about the profession. “We want to keep the momentum going.”

Instead, the course was offered to personnel of companies in the coalition who aren’t sewers but wanted to learn about the craft. Additionally, the state of Wisconsin awarded a \$30,000 grant that was used to train other coalition member employees in the areas of supervision and leadership.

The Makers Coalition Foundation consists of businesses, educational institutions and nonprofit organizations working together to find and train the next generation of industrial sewing operators, to meet future industry demands. The Coalition and the Industrial Fabrics

Association International (IFAI) have formed a partnership to strengthen the industry, train a new generation of sewers and create a workforce pipeline. Tarrant County College, for example, is a Makers curriculum partner and offers a multi-level upholstery program. (For information on the programs and resources being offered by IFAI and the Makers Division, visit <http://makers.ifai.com>.)

Equally important to attaining workers is retaining them. CustomFab USA has a skilled workforce of 275-plus machine operators and administrators, some of whom have worked for the 25-year-old company as long as it has been in business.

“When it comes to maintaining our workforce, our best strategy is to treat our employees as family,” Alhanati says. “That means being invested in their education, training and treating them with respect.”

Holly O’Dell is a business writer based in Joshua Tree, Calif. For contact information on the sources interviewed in this article, turn to page 77.

OUTPERFORM. OUTLAST. OUTSTANDING FASTENERS.

Fasteners need to do more than fasten. They need to perform. In rugged and demanding conditions, DOT® fasteners from Scovill are the strongest and most durable. From their heavy-duty construction, uniform engineering and adherence to the toughest specifications, DOT fasteners are the choice for leading industrial manufacturers and distributors that won’t settle for average.

ATTACHED TO ENDURING PARTNERSHIPS.

IFAI Expo Booth #2050

QUALITY
FASTENERS

Snap Fasteners
Grommets & Washers
Directional Snaps