

new fabrics at material world

U.S. textile companies respond to the challenge of an open market. Kathlyn Swantko reports from Miami

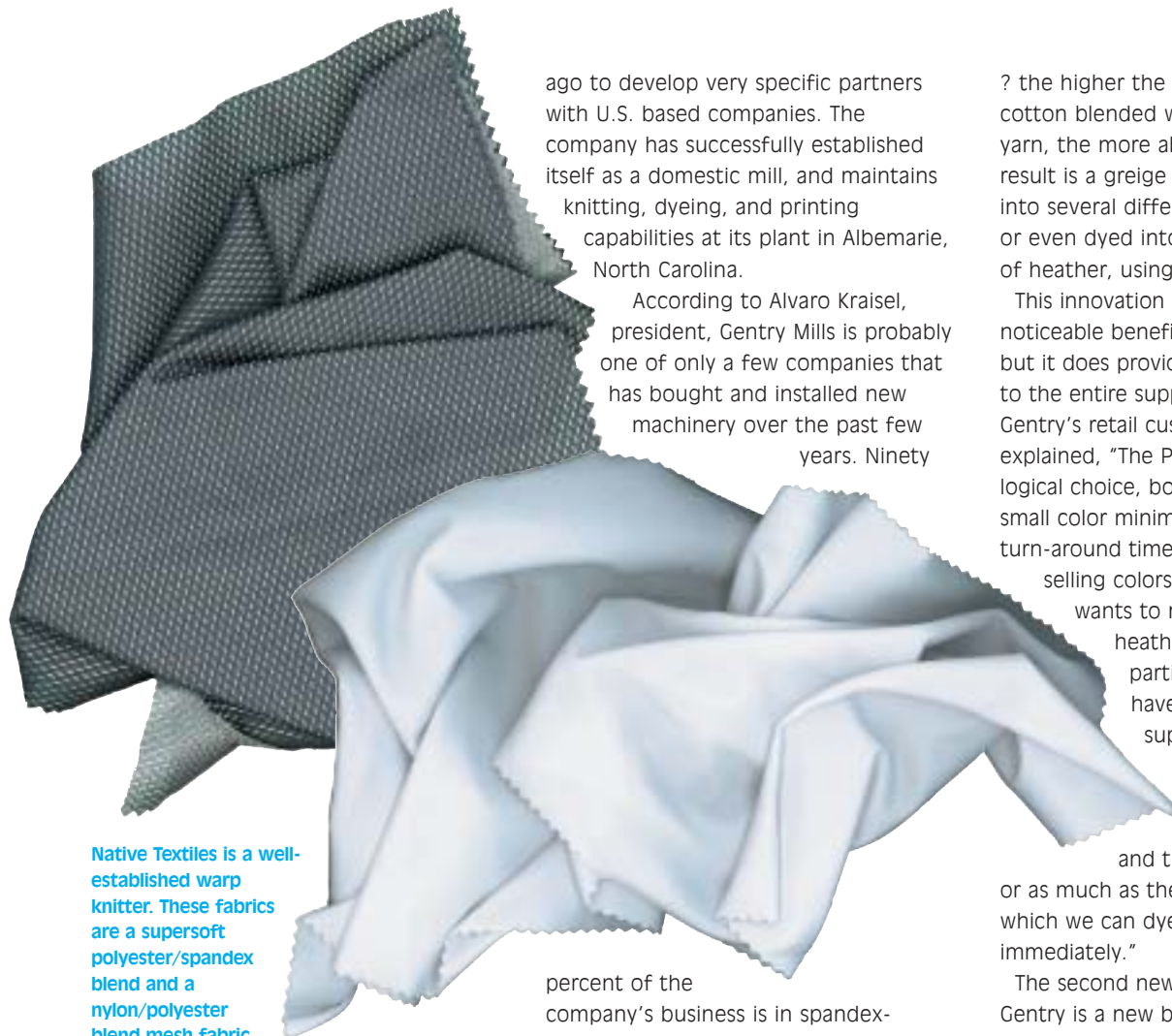
In the post quota world, it's time to look for new global opportunities." That was the stark message presented at the latest production of the Material World, the international trade show, which ran at the Miami Convention Center in March. The show addressed the issues of new and expanded opportunities for global trade with a variety of nations through a number of seminars.

In addition to the traditional domestic

exhibitors, the introduction of the ASAP Global Pavilion facilitated networking opportunities between North, Central, and South American companies and representatives from the top textile and accessory manufacturing organizations from China, India, Pakistan, Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong.

International sourcing was also evident at the 'Regional Sourcing Producers Perspective', which was one of the key seminars held during the show. The

main topic of discussion was China. An important statement made during the discussion was that "nothing can compare with direct human communication. Therefore, China will not replace Central America because of the latter's proximity to the U.S. market." And, although China is trying to be everything to everyone, the question that still remains is, "Will there be enough people within the Chinese industry, who truly understand the



Native Textiles is a well-established warp knitter. These fabrics are a supersoft polyester/spandex blend and a nylon/polyester blend mesh fabric.

needs of the U.S. customer, to make China the only solution in a global environment."

In spite of the challenges created by an open market economy, the overall mood of domestic suppliers at Material World was very upbeat. Exhibitors felt they were making good contacts, and were generating excitement by featuring many new and interesting product developments. In addition, U.S. mills are using their ingenuity to create some inventive ways of cutting valuable lead times off deliveries and reorders, which makes for a more appealing resource.

KnitAmericas highlights what several of these "survival-minded" companies are doing to become more competitive in the open market.

A 25 year old successful high-end Canadian based knitting company is **Gentry Mills, Inc.** This company opened a plant in the U.S. nine years

ago to develop very specific partners with U.S. based companies. The company has successfully established itself as a domestic mill, and maintains knitting, dyeing, and printing capabilities at its plant in Albemarle, North Carolina.

According to Alvaro Kraisel, president, Gentry Mills is probably one of only a few companies that has bought and installed new machinery over the past few years. Ninety

percent of the company's business is in spandex-related items. Gentry Mills' market base is mainly intimate apparel and it is also aggressively going after the performance sportswear market. The company has established itself as the mill to consider when it comes to new and innovative product developments.

Kraisel stated, "We've set ourselves up to be a domestic supplier, and have set up relationships with yarn suppliers and chemical suppliers. We now have opportunities to provide packages. So, when I'm going to see a retail customer, I'm rarely walking in there alone. I'm usually going in with my garment manufacturing partner and my yarn partner."

At Material World, Gentry Mills featured two new products. The first was a group of heathered fabrics from its Intimate line, which utilizes Four Leaf Textile's Protura yarn. Protura is a 100% engineered cationic-dyed cotton fiber, which allows varying amounts of dye to penetrate the yarn, depending on the percentage of Protura used in the yarn

? the higher the percentage of Protura cotton blended with the regular cotton yarn, the more absorption of color. The result is a greige fabric that can be dyed into several different heathered colors, or even dyed into striped shades/tones of heather, using a single dye bath.

This innovation doesn't provides no noticeable benefit to the end-consumer, but it does provide some big advantages to the entire supply chain, including Gentry's retail customer. Kraisel explained, "The Protura product is a logical choice, both in terms of meeting small color minimums, and in terms of turn-around time on replenishing top selling colors. When the retailer wants to replenish a good selling heather garment in a particular color, they don't have to go to the yarn supplier and wait six weeks. Instead, the greige fabric is sitting in our stock, and they can order as little, or as much as they want of a color, which we can dye and ship out immediately."

The second new product featured by Gentry is a new bamboo product, which the company has been working on for over year. Gentry's bamboo is a blend of bamboo/cotton/spandex. Kraisel said, "The reason I like this fabric is because there is a story in it. Somebody can actually get behind this, and market it as a new fabric. It's not a cotton. It's not a rayon. It's bamboo. And, it's very cost effective. It breathes. It's a natural bacterial static product. It doesn't kill bacteria, but it naturally inhibits the growth of bacteria."

Meanwhile, **Elcatex**, a large vertical mill, located in Coholoma, Cortés, Honduras, maintains a 500,000 sq. ft. textile mill, that includes 400 circular knitting machines, dyeing, finishing, napping, cutting, sewing, and packaging equipment, as well as warehousing and shipping facilities. The company's weekly fabric capacity is 1.8 million pounds. Fabrics produced include knitted fabric, cut parts, and full package programs. The company manufacturers knit jersey, 1X1 rib, 2X1 rib, 2-end and 3-end fleece, pique, interlock, and dyed yarn feed



Left: Scenes from the halls at Material World in Miami, FL.

stripes. Elcatex's finished garments include basic t-shirts, fleece hoods, crews, pants, pique polo shirts, briefs, boxers, and panties.

Elcatex has also developed a new branded technical product for Speedo, the details of which were unavailable as of the writing of this article. The product is scheduled to be marketed by mid-summer '05. In addition to its branded line of underwear, intimate apparel, daywear, and sleepwear, Elcatex also produces private label products for Vanity Fair (i.e. Vassarette, Victoria Secret, and Tommy Hilfiger), J.C. Penney Delicates, and Kellwood brands.

On the warp knitted front, Native Textiles, Inc. is a 65 year old, Glen Falls, New York, based warp knitter, which traditionally has focused on the intimate apparel, activewear, and swimwear markets. Native Textiles dates back to 1934 and when it began as Native Lace Works in Hightstown, New

Jersey. Over the years the Glen Falls facility has been expanded and modernized. The most recent expansion in 2000 involved the \$4 million installation of a new tenter frame. Today, the

Glen Falls operation consists of the main dyeing and finishing facility (150,000 square feet), a warehouse and distribution facility (50,000 square feet) and a warping and knitting facility (115,000 square feet) located in nearby Queensbury, New York.

To become more competitive in an open market economy, **Native Textiles** is developing more high-tech products, utilizing several performance yarns including Unifi's Sorbtek, A.M.Y. , and Sultra yarns, and Nylstar's Meryl yarn. The bulk of what the company does is

in nylon/spandex and polyester/spandex. David Turk, director of product development noted, "For one of the big domestic yoga houses, we're running a fabric that has a high temperature spandex from Radici with a dispersed polyester, which gives color fastness and no bleeding issues. Usually, with dispersed polyester and spandex, you need a cationic polyester."

In addition, Native Textiles has introduced some new products for the outerwear market, using two-layer breathable membranes, containing a mesh on one side, and a layer of brushed flannel on the other side. The fabric is a blend of poly/nylon. Native Textiles has partnered with Narcote on the laminating. Turk said, "We've had a terrific reaction to this group. So, we're building on our initial success in the outerwear market!"

The newest product that the company is producing is a product called Skins. This is a proprietary compression fabric, initially developed by an Australian company, which basically reduces the lactic acid build-up in the body, which reduces fatigue. Native Textiles is the manufacturer of this product in the United States.



Right: Heathered fabrics from Gentry Mills 'Intimate' line, which utilizes Four Leaf Textile's Protura yarn.

Left: Gentry's interesting new 'bamboo' is plain knit blend of bamboo (67%)/cotton (28%)/spandex (5%).

Knit trim products

Minnesota Knitting manufacturers knit trim in a wide variety of yarns to meet the specific needs of its customers.

The 97 year old, privately owned company uses stretch and spun nylon, textured, spun and stretch polyester, acrylic, wool, cotton, poly/cotton, Nomex, Kevlar, spandex, elastic, Cordura, and more.

"In recent years, Steve O'Neil, director of sales & marketing explained, we've diversified our business to focus on niche markets. We're doing technical products, military, automotive, industrial, workwear, and medical. We don't have a stock of fabrics; and we don't have a stock color palate. We do all of our own piece dyeing."

Because of the company's diversification, Minnesota Mills has been able to hold on to a core group of customers. O'Neil noted, "Fortunately for us, it hasn't made sense for our core group of customers, either because of a time-to-market basis or the because of their target market focus, for them to transfer that business overseas."

According to O'Neil, this is Minnesota Mills fifth time exhibiting at Material World. He outlined the reasons why its important to participate in Material World: Fifty percent of the reason for being at the show is to meet with the company's customers, who are also in attendance. O'Neil noted, "If we can see a half dozen of these companies, or more, it's worthwhile for us." Another 25% of the reason to exhibit at Material World, according to O'Neil, is to show the market that Minnesota Mills is viable ? still in business, etc.

And, the last 25% of the reason is at the off-chance of making a new contact

that you didn't have before ? someone doing research on a new project or a new venture, etc.

Los Angeles based **Sprotek International Inc.**



A selection of trims from Minnesota Knitting Mills.

operates on its ability to respond quickly to customer demand on a selection of technical products for the swimwear and activewear markets. Sprotek, along with its sister company Yasha Fabrics maintains in-stock programs for a variety of colors of knitted fabrics containing nylon, spandex, poly/spandex, and other spandex blends in mesh, fleece, and tricot constructions.

The company's key performance product is its SportUPF by Sprotek International Inc., which contains 80%

nylon/20% spandex.

This fabric has an ultraviolet protection factor of 50+, which means that it provides excellent protection against the powerful UV rays present in sunlight, and blocks 97.5% of these harmful UV rays. This fabric is also available in a variety of colors for quick deliveries from in-stock goods.