

Triad textile innovations are anywhere and every wear

Katie Arcieri

Just about everyone wants clothes that make them look and feel cool. At Hanesbrands, that strategy is quite literal, incorporating cooling technology into underwear and athletic apparel. Others, from VF Corp. to Cone Denim and **Unifi**, also are developing a host of fabrics and jeans that provide a more comfortable and stylish cut.

Of course, innovation has always been in the DNA of Triad apparel companies, but they are increasingly focused on strategies to gain market share from pickier-than-ever consumers who may be willing to pay more for novel products even amid an ever-expanding menu of choices.

“Many times there is a big payoff,” says Don Jud, a local economist. “A firm that is able to figure out what people want can reach big returns.”

Unlike smaller firms, larger companies such as VF have an advantage when it comes to innovation because they can afford to take bigger risks, Jud says.

“They can take more risks because they have a wider product mix and more eggs in their basket,” he says.

Push to innovate

Local textile companies are pushing innovation through a range of strategies, from incorporating technology in existing apparel categories to creating research incubators (see sidebar, page 12) to come up with fresh ideas.

Scott Baxter, vice president of VF Corp. and group president for Jeanswear Americas and Imagewear, says that the goal of the company’s new jeanswear incubator expected to be operational during the first half of 2014 is to generate denim ideas that will bring more comfort and style to consumers.

“With jeans and with denim, people constantly want to have better fabrics, better washes, vibrant colors,” Baxter says. Consumers also want to feel good about what they are wearing. “If your jeans fit well, you have confidence.”

Baxter says VF has a great opportunity to capitalize on innovation within the jeanswear category, especially now that it is becoming socially acceptable to wear denim at times and places other than on the weekends. VF also has an opportunity to create more comfortable jeans for people who work in outdoor trade environments whether it's a construction site, a ranch or a farm, he says.

The company is already expanding on that opportunity with its Wrangler brand. For example, the team responsible for the development of an "advanced comfort jean" launched this summer works from Wrangler's Greensboro headquarters at 400 N. Elm St. The jeans product is an addition to the company's premium performance cowboy cut collection and is billed as having a "unique blend of fibers that results in denim that moves with the body for extreme comfort that lasts two-times longer."

In Winston-Salem, Hanesbrands also is focused on new product innovation. Richard Noll, the company's chairman and CEO, said in a conference call in August that Hanesbrands is continuing to drive "big core innovations" that, coupled with its supply chain leverage, will expand margins as part of its "innovate to elevate" strategy.

Noll noted that the company is working on driving growth and innovation for three specific products: ComfortBlend, which is bringing performance fabrics to the underwear category; X-Temp, which is cooling technology in the underwear and activewear categories; and Smart Sizes technology that provides "superior fit and comfort for women."

"These are the kind of innovations that consumers are willing to pay more for and over time allow us to continue to grow that category and expand our margins," Noll said.

Unifi Inc., a Greensboro-based yarn maker, already has a slew of innovative products ranging from its Sorbtek moisture-wicking fabric to the Repreve recycled product manufactured in Yadkinville.

But the company is now working on several fabric technologies that will be launched during the next three to six months, says Jay Hertwig, Unifi's vice president of global brand sales and marketing.

Hertwig declined to detail the nature of the products, but they are part of Unifi's larger plan to be more competitive outside of the market for commodities, which are less differentiated products.

To drive growth, Unifi is investing \$14 million during the next two years on growth initiatives for its portfolio of premier value-added (PVA) products. The goal is to create product materials that customers will pay more for whether they provide stretch, color-retention or drying and moisture-wicking properties, Hertwig says.

Unifi is also working to offer Sorbtek as a staple fiber in 2014. Doing so will not only allow the company to enter the product into the spun yarn market but also expand Sorbtek's end-user base to a variety of products such as men's casual and dress pants, and performance wear applications such as T-shirts.

"Innovation is the only platform that Unifi has to grow on," Hertwig says. "These are all products that are value-added."