

## Roger Berrier: Unifi president found his message in a bottle



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When Greensboro-based yarn maker [Unifi](#) Inc. introduced a recycled fiber product called Repeve in 2007, the reception was “lukewarm at best,” recalls [Roger Berrier](#), the company’s president and chief operating officer. “We were just a little bit ahead of our time,” he said. “We were very proud of ourselves, but we were not getting a lot of sales.”

But that lukewarm reception changed to red-hot demand in recent years thanks initially to a key customer — Polartec — that was seeking a recycled fiber for garments. Officials at Unifi (NYSE: UFI) declined to provide revenue figures, but said Repeve is growing and now used in a host of products ranging from jackets by The North Face to the cloth seats of Ford Focus Electric and Fusion models.

What led you to Unifi? It was my first job out of college. I grew up in Mount Airy, so being somewhat local I was looking for jobs in North Carolina and the opportunity presented itself at Unifi. Just like probably any other college graduate, I took my first job thinking I would figure things out as I move forward, and I’m still here.

What was your first role with Unifi? I came to Unifi in 1991, and my first job was in our research-and-development engineering department. It was based in Yadkinville. Back in the 1990s, we were expanding and growing rapidly so there was a need for an R&D engineering department. This department was responsible for all the machinery, all the technology, all the research. We were responsible for installing and starting up the equipment.

What did you enjoy about that time? Mechanical engineering was always an interest to me because I like being engaged and hands-on and being involved in the plant.

How did you transition from Yadkinville to Greensboro? As I was moving through engineering, I got involved in operations and quality and building specifications for customers and sort of just moving up through different departments. When Unifi decided that we wanted to take our first entry into Asia, we did that in Thailand in 2002. I was asked to move to Thailand with my family in 2002 to be the general manager of a big site over there. My daughter was 5 at the time.



Roger Berrier is president and COO of Unifi Inc.

What do you remember about that role? It was fantastic. Certainly it was challenging and a new culture. I had six American people from Unifi working with me, and then we had probably 1,200 Thai people working. I was the general manager of the whole site. Unifi was being paid to manage the operation. It was more of an alliance with the intent in the future to do an official equity joint venture. But as we worked in Thailand for two-and-a-half years, we decided that China would be a better place for us. During that transition from Thailand to China, I was asked if I wanted to return home, which I did.

What was your role at that point? When I came back, I was asked to be over all of our product development and marketing in 2004. We needed to bring more innovation, more technology, more differentiated products. Based on my background in machine design, and customers and operations, it was a good fit for me to come back and try to lead this effort for the company.

How did the idea for Repreve come about? I had several engineers working for me in the product development field and one engineer came up with the idea of, 'I think we can do something with our internal waste to recycle it back into a first-quality product.' So we started with the concept. It was really Unifi taking a holistic approach to say 'what can we do to recycle our own waste, to be a better company?' That's really how Repreve was born. It was fiber waste. Unifi introduced Repreve in 2007 to lukewarm reception.

What changed the demand? Polartec came to us, and we had this big product development meeting. We were introducing moisture-management, odor control. They stopped the meeting and said, 'do you have a recycled product?' Because we already had Repreve sort of somewhat on the shelf, we were able to give them a product very quickly. And within probably eight months, they were able to go from a concept to commercializing garments with recycled content with Repreve.

Why did Polartec at that time want a recycled product? Their main customers are Patagonia, The North Face, REI, and so they were starting to show some interest in incorporating recycled content into their garments. That was a very key moment because once that started, we knew we were onto something. We started advertising it more and promoting it to our customers. And just one by one, it started getting more and more traction.

How did Repreve begin to use plastic bottles in the product? Polartec wanted an easier story to tell the customer, and we needed more waste, so it was a good fit for us to start including bottles. It's a perfect polyester material for us. When you melt a bottle down or you take yarn and melt it down, it's the same chemical composition.

How did your daughter's interest in Repreve help you realize that Unifi was onto something big? She was always the one who watched to make sure we put the recycled content in the right recycle bin in the trash. When I told her about what we were doing as a company, for the first time she was very engaged and very inquisitive. The fact that she was so interested in what we were doing with recycled content, I was like, 'we are onto something.' That age demographic is going to eventually become 18-25 years old, and they are going to have the purchasing power. That generation is more in tune with sustainable initiatives, our environment, wanting to do the right thing. So we picked up on that and said how do we capitalize on this opportunity?

What's something most people don't know about you? I am a certified rescue scuba-diver.

How did you become a scuba-diver? It's always something that I wanted to do, and my daughter had a lot of interest. We decided to go be certified as a family. We've been diving now for about six years. We went from just an open-water certified diver to an advanced diver. Now my daughter and I are certified rescue divers.

Where do you dive? Usually in the Caribbean. We incorporate our vacation with scuba-diving and relaxing.

What's it like down there? To me, it's just peaceful. Everything sort of slows down. When I'm down there diving, I'm just enjoying the moment.

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