

Creating the Future of Textiles

Empowering people to drive change and innovation is at the heart of our industry's growth.

by Bud Weisbart

To me, this boils down to people. The most exciting and intriguing developments lie within our industry members' abilities to seek out applications for fabric products, which are not normally thought of as technical, but that can address requirements and/or problems with fabrics. Our abilities and competencies can expand our individual businesses—and our industry as a whole—by looking for potential applications to meet a variety of requirements. This will lead to diversified growth.

We are continually bombarded with the argument that developed economies no longer have a role in manufacturing; to me this is blatantly incorrect. We just need to shift our focus from commoditized products to look toward specialized and technical products.

An example of this concept beyond our industry is found in the automobile sector and provides insight into the transformation of manufacturing today. The lessons learned from the core competencies and high-quality products from Japanese and Korean automakers improve our domestic automotive manufacturing. In the same way, the fabrics industry can learn from this example and build from our knowledge and competency to provide top-notch products that address requirements and problems for those products and services. I see this happening in the areas of the development of architectural structures, aerospace products, durable protective products, and multiple other product areas. The future is ours if we pursue this approach.

The researchers are driving this, together with the development of technology in our economy that is creating technical requirements for fabric products. It is up to those of us who have the capabilities to address these technological requirements to adapt our focus to do so.

First of all, we have never established a niche that boxes us into a specific market for our products and services. Rather, we analyze requirements and opportunities in relationship to our ability to create an approach to those requirements based on

quality and the value we can provide through fabric solutions. I am just now listening to a presentation that examines the experiences and consequences of a company that allowed itself to be boxed in.

Research In Motion (RIM), manufacturer of the BlackBerry, once dominated its market. When confronted with the iPhone and its computer capabilities, the board responded by saying, "This is not what we do." RIM now holds a small fraction of their previous market share, and this is a lesson for those in our industry. If we position ourselves to adapt and diversify—as long as the way we do it can be justified on the basis of our competencies—we will provide outstanding value and quality.

With the growth of technical applications in the fields of geotextiles, electromagnetic, antistatic, conductive, high- and low-temperature, and architectural fabrics, along with acoustical insulation and similar fields, our industry members have the ability to take their talents into new areas. What can minimize their efforts? Self-imposed limitations to take what they consider the "risks" involved. The real risk is found in avoiding risk entirely, but that has been the unfortunate tale of the history of many businesses, both inside and outside of our industry.

We continually see applications for new products, most often not for mass production, but rather addressing very high value requirements for technical products and services. For example, we have had recent requirements for shielding products and technically oriented applications to enclose customers' products with Electro-Magnetic Interference (EMI) Assemblies while they are being built. In addition we are working on valve systems that allow depressurization in an area while blocking debris from entering that area, and on possible industrial applications such as overspray shields for aircraft that are being assembled. What makes these important to us is that these customers are all aerospace companies with whom we have developed long-lasting relationships over many years. I think these are examples of maximizing growth potential, both inside our company and in the greater industry, and in doing so we are leading our way forward with no boundaries in sight. Innovation in technologies and applications will continue to surprise.