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Minnesota Sewn Product Manufacturers: Opportunities and Challenges

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There are significant changes occurring in Minnesota where there is a strong history of apparel production. Most of the US apparel and textile industry was gone by the late 1980s due to growing competition from offshore manufacturing. Society's view of global economics is changing as apparel produced offshore raises concerns regarding sustainability, quality, and human rights. There is a renewed interest from consumers in products Made in America, thus some manufactures are taking advantage of the opportunities to produce locally.

Consumers' desire for distinction and sustainability has supported the popularity of the local food movement. Consumers are demanding apparel that respects social, economic, and environmental sustainability also. A growing number of small companies, with an interest in designing and manufacturing domestically for specialized markets, are responding to this opportunity. Recognizing the challenges and opportunities for Minnesota companies contributes to understanding the wave of change that is occurring across the country. Analysis of a diverse range of domestic manufacturers is needed to recognize strategies to support these new companies under conditions that are unlike those from the past.

Reshoring or domestic manufacturing is a growing trend that has the potential to reduce manufacturers' labor and production costs and support consumer demand for products Made in America (Standard & Poors, 2014). Larger companies plan to shift some manufacturing to the US as they have concerns about accountability on ethical issues, shorter production cycles, quick costing, and decreasing cheap labor costs (Lloyd, 2014). Also, there are benefits to quality control, flexibility, and supply chain that balances out the costs. (Dana et al., 2007).

Jung and Jin (2014) suggest that slow fashion may inspire US domestic manufacturing and local economies. Value is added by slowing down the process and designing products that represent the place and local culture, using local resources (DeLong et al., 2013).

Fourteen companies from across the state were interviewed about their motivations, opportunities, and challenges with domestic manufacturing. The companies ranged in size from 1-200 employees and made products ranging from canvas bags to dancewear, and women's wear to bowties. Companies were located from public records. Interviews took place in person at the manufacturing site, at a public space, or by phone from January 2015-February 2016 and were digitally recorded. The digital interviews were independently coded and organized into themes in a content analysis, then compared and discussed to reach a final interpretation.

Each company has a unique story and niche in the marketplace. Though they face daily challenges, there was an overriding optimism and a deep commitment to designing and manufacturing domestically. The loyalty to their local community and their employees was in deep contrast to the common image of a faceless worker in substandard, unsafe working conditions offshore. The themes of personal values and economics emerged under motivations; the local economy, control, and uniqueness were revealed as opportunities; and challenges included the themes of manufacturing resources and costs. These confirmed the broader perceptions and reality of domestic production from the literature. Figure I summarizes the themes that arose through the content analysis.

This group of Minnesota manufacturers is able to balance the opportunities and challenges of domestic manufacturing with their strongly held values. Increased control and uniqueness are advantages that support with the literature, however, the opportunity to support the local economy has not been referenced. A responsibility to their employees goes beyond insuring good working conditions to building a healthy, thriving community. The challenges of high labor costs and a lack of well trained, experienced employees were confirmed. Access to manufacturing resources varies depending on location and how much of the old industry and infrastructure remains in a specific part of the country. Knowing where materials are sourced and how they are made, knowing that workers are fairly paid and protected, and

Fig. 1: Motivations, Opportunities and Challenges of Minnesota Manufacturers to Produce Locally

Motivation	Opportunities	Challenges
Personal Values	Local Economy	Manufacturing Resources
Conducting business in a way that aligned with the manufacturer's personal values including: human rights, integrity, high quality craftsmanship, and support of local economy.	The ability to support the local economy by hiring locally, spending locally and producing locally.	Lack of local manufacturing resources including: industry networks, vendors, material sourcing, specialized equipment, and a skilled workforce.
Economic	Control	Cost
Providing a livelihood for the owners of the business and for their employees.	Having control throughout the entire production process including: working conditions, quality, timing and communications.	Balancing the high costs of domestic production with a final product cost that the consumer is willing to pay that will still make a profit.
	Uniqueness	
	Differentiation in the market of both the products and service provided by the company.	

knowing that clothing is of high quality (Fletcher, 2008) were also drivers for these businesses, though they did not refer to their products as ‘slow fashion’. The desire to be practice sustainability was not indicated by these businesses. DeLong et al (2013) found various definitions of sustainability among designers and were interpreted to be part of their business best practices, even though they did not consider their practices sustainable. A broader review of the relationship between sustainability as an incentive for domestic manufacturing is needed. The process of developing a new model for domestic manufacturing with a new infrastructure is a common goal for these manufacturers, as well as those across the country.

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