

Emtex, a textile company through and through

Emtex started out as part of Chelsea Industries, a diversified group of companies covering textiles, plastics and shoe components. At one stage, the shoe component division was one of the largest in the American footwear industry. It produced reinforcement tapes under the Ideal Tape brand, cutting dyes at Progressive Service Dye Co. and shoe laces at Hope Webbing Co. It also supplied upper materials from Gilbert Freeman Fabrics Co. and bows, ornaments and stripping from Premier Shoe Goods Co.

In the early 1980s, concerned at the rapid shrinkage in domestic footwear manufacture the Casty family, which owned Chelsea, indicated a willingness to sell these companies in order to re-invest in industries where it felt there was a better future. At the time, Bob Livingston was president of the Emtex division and Joe Tutrone VP sales. Bob had been with Chelsea since 1962 and Joe since 1970, so they both knew the business well. They felt that there was still a good future if they were able to direct policy completely themselves and so, in 1985, they bought Emtex from Chelsea under a leveraged buyout.

A NEW BEGINNING

When they both started out at the original Emerson Textile Co.,

Laminating camouflage fabric



Boot by Wolverine in camouflage fabric

there was still a huge domestic footwear industry. Located in Chelsea, Massachusetts, a state with a long tradition of textile manufacture, the principal product line was originally trimming for the canvas footwear industry which was then substantial. Factories in Florida were producing 200,000 pairs of sneakers per day all using bindings for which Emerson Textile was the major supplier. Chelsea then also began to supply the laminated duck-weave cotton upper material itself through Gilbert Freeman Fabrics until, in 1983, Emerson and Freeman were merged into a single company under the name of GFEmtex Inc., and finally Emtex Inc. in 1985

Today, the company still produces laminated fabrics and meshes for major sports shoe brands, Cordura, nylon and polyester fabrics for hiking and hunting boots, and various other upper fabrics and linings for casual footwear manufacturers. In addition, it also has specialty lines such as Snakeguard and Thornshield that protect hunters, farmers, linemen and other active outdoor workers.

Emtex also supplies a highly breathable, low cost waterproof membrane system called WetproofPlus, and is licensed by Real Tree and Mossy Oak to reproduce its camouflage patterns on Cordura and nylons which are then laminated with breathable film or felt for use in hunting boots. All of these products are designed for use with standard shoemaking machinery and techniques and the company also advises on the integration of its materials into new products. Over the years, Emtex has also been a major supplier of materials for US military footwear and, to a lesser extent, some foreign governments. The current product line is further expanded by proprietary materials that include upper meshes and linings bought in from business partners in Asia.

COPING WITH CHANGE

As the domestic sneaker industry began to shrink and all the sneakers began to be made firstly in Japan, then Taiwan and Korea, and eventually China, Bob and Joe began to focus their

efforts on supplying laminated fabrics to outdoor boot and athletic footwear manufacturers both domestically and in Asia. Today, the company supplies all the major footwear producers in the USA and, in order to remain competitive in an ever-changing world footwear market, it has more recently begun to laminate and stock fabrics in China. In addition, it now supplies products for a variety of non-footwear industries such as medical, orthopaedic and automotive.

For 20 years, all Emtex products were produced in an old multi-level brick factory in Chelsea. Eventually, due to the shrinking domestic market, it became inefficient to continue to manufacture in the USA and ship abroad, so the decision was made to shut the factory down and outsource all manufacturing. The main focus then became one of marketing and product development, while at the same time being able to supply quality products at competitive prices. The market is the world footwear industry and, as well as the USA, the company currently sells products to Asia, South and Central America, Europe and Africa.

To cope with the downturn in domestic shoe manufacture, new products are constantly developed and available from facilities in Asia. Most US customers now have products made to their specification in Asia, so they are visited both at home and in their Chinese supplier factories in order to co-ordinate product development and manufacturing. In addition, using contacts that have been developed in Asia, it has become possible to develop proprietary products on an exclusive basis. Snakeguard and Thornshield are both the result of technology developed jointly between Emtex and one of their many worldwide partners.

Company headquarters are now located in Danvers, Massachusetts, and directly controls all product development and testing, sales, customer service and administration. In addition, there are the strong manufacturing and sales partnerships in Asia. More Shoe Parts in China and Taiwan has been instrumental during this transitional time and aside from sales it has worked to monitor and maintain quality standards at the manufacturing locations in China. This is supported by a warehouse in Hong Kong that receives and distributes both US and Asian made goods.

Joel Livingston – VP operations



Alternative products



FACING THE FUTURE

Emtex continues to be committed to its heritage as primarily a footwear components supplier. By outsourcing manufacturing it is able to take advantage of the technology of laminators and coaters who not only work in the footwear industry but in many others besides. In the course of the past few years, relationships have been developed with major Asian fabric suppliers and the company currently represents Long John Industries which is one of the largest suppliers of fabrics for sports shoes. Most recently, the products of San Fang—a major PU supplier to the footwear industry—have been added to the company's offering. This policy will be continued so that a constant stream of new and exciting products can be brought to the market.

Bob and Joe are now respectively chairman and president—with Bob's son Joel VP of operations—of a business that is now entering its 22nd year. When they bought Emtex back in 1985, it was against the background of a declining domestic industry. Since then, however, they have vastly expanded sales and made it into a vibrant and highly successful company. The future of the industry is to be a world supplier and their company has prospered in this changing and exciting environment.

As Bob says, "The footwear industry has changed constantly and there is no reason to expect that it won't continue to do so. Wages will rise in various places driving manufacturing to new locations. The biggest unknown, however, is the future cost of energy, and in particular, transportation. We predict geopolitical forces will influence US footwear manufacturers to begin to seek stronger manufacturing and materials relationships in the Western hemisphere."

Another thought provoking view the company holds is the need for second- and third-tier footwear importers to become more involved in materials specification. At the moment, these decisions are often left to offshore contract manufacturers and frequently have a negative impact on both quality and comfort. While there will obviously be pricing imperatives, importers would be well served to at least understand and influence the materials choices that are being made on their behalf if they expect to build brand loyalty. That would certainly make sense. 