



Bill Schmidt, Sr., walks each of his factories daily to connect closely with operations and his workers.

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A recent example is personal care and technology products. He's also had plenty of opportunities to sell the company, but he's not about to do it—not on his watch, he says.

Instead, Hit continuously works to improve its methods and expand its talent by adding to the ranks in middle and upper management. "One of our strengths is that we can make a decision right now. We don't have to go to a board of directors—we do it right here," he says, glancing around his conference table. "We also understand the supplier/distributor model and we really adhere to that."

Being family owned also enables them to easily be open about product safety issues with their distributors as they often have to share factory information with their clients and end users as far as the location of factories in China and trust them not to go directly to the manufacturer.

Now in his seventies, Schmidt has no thoughts of retirement. "When you like what you do, you don't ever want to retire," he says. "I love this business. I go back to what my father and grandfather always told me: success is solving problems. That's what you have to do every day. Sometimes coming to work I think, 'I'm not going to stop at the factory today.' Then I think, 'You *have* to do this.' I go there and see something I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't been there. I enjoy what I'm doing." **PPB**

Tina Berres Filipski is editor of PPB.

EYE ON APPAREL

WE COME IN

THIS SOFT, EASY-CARE FABRIC IS HERE TO STAY. SEE HOW IT'S
BY TAMA UNDERWOOD

THE MANY QUALITIES OF synthetic fleece have kept it in high demand since its introduction some 35 years ago. Athletes, campers and tourists prize fleece for its lightweight warmth, quick-drying nature and easy-care properties. Environmentalists like it because it's often made of recycled materials, and sensitive types long for the soft, swaddled feel that is a hallmark of wearing fleece.

To further capitalize on fleece's versatility, designers have set out to modernize standard fleece pieces and develop functional, fashionable options that suit more tastes. "Buyers are looking for variations on the traditional fleece sweatshirt, such as flattering silhouettes that complement any body, adjustable systems that offer easy, custom fit options and collar treatments such as Henley and quarter- or half-zip styles," says Heather Brunner Kelly, marketing manager for Sharon, Massachusetts-based supplier Charles River Apparel (UPIC: CRA).

New bonding techniques are resulting in fleece apparel that is thinner and fits the body more closely, too. These thinner fabric

weights are making fleece a viable option year-round, says Gina Barreca, director of marketing for Avenel, New Jersey-based supplier Vantage (UPIC: vantage). "Nordic-type fleece is really the only fabrication that skews fall-winter," she says. "Lighter-weight styles have really made fleece a seasonless item."

Buyers are also interested in men's and women's complementary pieces.

"The term 'unisex' can sometimes hinder a product's wearability," Kelly cautions, further emphasizing buyers' interest in flattering silhouettes and customized fits, especially in ladies' apparel.

When selecting fleece, buyers still rely on traditional colors such as dark gray and black; however, interest in brighter color options is rising. Kelly reports seeing a strong demand for fleece in vibrant colors such as yellow, forest and hunter green, and shades of red.

For clients interested in bold colors but reluctant to take the plunge, Nadia Santoli, communications manager for Richmond Hill, Ontario-based supplier Ash City (UPIC: ash0001), suggests color blocking select garment panels, adding pops of color to zippers or pulls, or using contrasting thread for decorative, colorful stitching.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when selling fleece is that it's constantly evolving from the fleece pieces you may have sold or worn in the past. "A main component of fleece's quality is the technology," Kelly says. "We continue to infuse new techniques, details and performance fabrics and features into our fleece garments."

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FLEECE

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