



Rethreading a textile heritage: One stitch at a time

A robust textile manufacturing industry once supported generations of artisans and their communities in western North Carolina. But the last three decades have seen mills close, jobs lost and lives changed due to offshoring. Now, a unique collaboration between a worker-owned firm, a manufacturing research and development center, a county economic development organization, and local mills is bringing new hope to the place they call home.

► The catalysts

Loss of a heritage industry. The western North Carolina hills once hummed with the sounds of the textile industry. But plants were shuttered and craftspeople displaced when cheaper labor lured manufacturers offshore. In less than two decades, towns that once vied for “best place to raise a family” now face decline and despair. Unemployment is stubbornly high. And many of the assets that once drove this industry are idled or disappearing.

Unusual collaboration. Bucking these trends, a new textile company—Opportunity Threads—started up in 2009 in Burke County, pursuing a new corporate model for the industry. It is worker-owned and environmentally focused, using mostly organic cotton, upcycled materials, and sustainable production methods. Opportunity Threads quickly formed a natural partnership with the Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC), Catawba Valley Community College’s effort to support innovative, small- to mid-sized manufacturers. The third key partner is Burke Development, Inc. (BDI), a traditional, county economic development organization that recognized the need to embrace out-of-the-box thinking.

Commitment to their values. What glues this collaboration together is their leaders’ commitment to transform the communities in which they were raised, reclaim the region’s heritage, rebuild infrastructure, and re-engage local assets along the way. They want to put people back to work and build incomes and livelihoods. For them, reinventing the textile sector is the vehicle.

► The value opportunity

In stores, markets and restaurants, more consumers have begun asking: Where is this food from? How is it grown? Those questions signal real demand, and have led to a thriving local foods movement.

A similar trend is emerging with textiles. Customers want to know: Are these clothes made in the United States? Are the materials organic? Are the workers paid fairly? Some are also asking: How big—or small—is the carbon footprint from this manufacturing?

That sounds like demand and opportunity to the western North Carolina partners. But consumer sentiment is only part of the story. Another opportunity lies in how to use the region’s idling resources more fully. Many textile mills still up and running are producing below capacity. Experienced machine operators sit idle. As one generation retires and fewer young people replace them, the craft of textile design and production is being lost.

So, how do you connect these assets to the growing demand for “clothes and products with a conscience”? That’s the opportunity these innovative partners are seizing.

► The demand

Opportunity Threads, MSC and BDI pulled together players from inside and outside the region to identify demand the region might meet—and they found it on three levels.

Apparel, fashion accessory, home goods and other entrepreneurs from across the country—many in their twenties and thirties—often approach manufacturing firms with new product ideas.

They might need help with design and patternmaking, sourcing small quantities of materials or creating a prototype or sales samples. Such entrepreneurs value the capacity to deliver small volume, quick turnaround and custom features—often critical for moving rapidly from idea to design to product to market.

Next, scaling brands that are ready to move into production are looking for partners, from printers and dye houses to cut and sew mills and fulfillment companies, to help them fill consumer demand for higher-end products. They value knowing and being able to visit the manufacturers creating their sewn goods—and know that consumers value this local-supply chain flavor and the increasing availability of “green” products, produced by fairly treated workers.

Finally, large fashion apparel and accessory companies are transitioning their production back to the States. As consumers demand more “Made in the USA” products, or deplore conditions in sweatshops overseas, these firms realize that their profitability may partly depend on returning production to local roots. And there is no better place to return than the rich textile heritage of western North Carolina.



“If you’re out on your own you have nothing. If you’re working together and sharing things then everybody has something and everybody wins.”

—Nand Thaper, Action Sports, participant in the Carolina Textile District

► Putting it together

The Carolina Textile District was created to capture this demand. This manufacturing value chain network has a simply stated goal: revitalize the textile industry in a sustainable way.

THE DISTRICT

CAROLINA TEXTILE DISTRICT

An innovative partnership rebuilding the textile sector

As the first step in this process, the partners mapped the assets and gaps that exist in the region’s textile industry. They started by engaging their most trusted colleagues—people and firms with whom they were already working. They reached out to other companies in the region who had underutilized capacity but little contact with each other. They pulled potential support partners into the circle—people and organizations that could bring technical assistance, financing and other resources to the value chain.

And they identified key bottlenecks—and then set out to address each one.

The District first needed a Client Intake System to manage new demand streaming into the region. Such a system saves product developers time and money by identifying the best firms in the region to move their products to market. It saves local firms valuable time spent responding to those customers. The District hired a full-time intake manager in mid-2013 and has provided support and services to over 1,000 clients.

Next, the network needed more fabric companies to provide smaller quantities for entrepreneurs. Brands that are producing in the U.S. today require smaller orders because they are selling mostly online, direct to consumer. Using its network, the Carolina Textile District identified and catalogued fabric producers and manufacturers to build a comprehensive

sourcing database of companies that will provide smaller quantities of fabric. This allows entrepreneurs and scaling brands the ability to complete smaller runs — reducing their upfront costs and risk.

Finally, the District needed more mill owners to bring their production capacity to the table. One owner who had employees working less than full-time took on new cut and sew work through the network to ramp up her production and add employee hours. Another owner, whose workforce had fallen from 25 employees to 7, joined the network and began taking on new types of cut and sew products. Ninety percent of CTD partners have added employees in the past year and a large majority have made shifts in their business model to accommodate modern demand.

► The bottom line: Grow your own wealth

So far, the results are promising. The Carolina Textile District is connecting low-income workers and mill owners to current and emerging demand in new, more effective and sustainable ways. Entrepreneurs are getting access to an infrastructure that can help them become real players in the industry. Mill owners are collaborating to use their production capacity more effectively. Workers are finding better quality jobs, earning more and gaining a piece of the ownership pie. Existing assets are being put to better use, and producers are collaborating based on shared values. The District itself is becoming financially sustainable — refining the business model and identifying new revenue streams.

To what end? The Carolina Textile District wants to change the conversation from nostalgia for the past to energy for the future. The District’s leaders want young people to choose to come home. They want to honor the region’s culture and heritage. They want everyone to benefit, from the budding entrepreneur to the oldest seamstress. The textile value chain network is one means to propel them to their goals.

the wealthworks inventory

In addition to the financial bottom line, these are the actual and anticipated results the Carolina Textile District is tracking as they sew their value chain network together:

- **Individual capital.** Locals have new skills in prototyping and sustainable manufacturing. Heritage sewing knowledge is maintained—with skills passing to new local workers.
- **Intellectual capital.** New production models for zero waste manufacturing, worker ownership and the inclusion of workers in the decision making and management of a business.
- **Social capital.** Deeper collaboration and relationships with traditional supply chain participants. Development of a shared vision for industry revitalization.
- **Natural capital.** Deeper understanding of the manufacturing “footprint” in the region. “Greener” textile production. Use of recycled and upcycled materials.
- **Built capital.** Revitalization of unused mill space. Creation of innovative new spaces for design and production that engage the next generation of textile workers and leaders.
- **Political capital.** Building relationships with policymakers who have the ability to influence trade policy and sharing with state and local leaders the modern story of the textile industry.
- **Financial capital.** More revenue and larger customer base for mill owners, and better jobs for workers. Capturing sales from outside the region. Building equity through worker-ownership model.
- **Local ownership and control.** Sharing Opportunity Threads’ worker-owned model as an option for other mill owners who need a transition plan to retirement. Exploring shared ownership options for the District itself.
- **Better livelihoods.** New, better jobs in the industry. Restoring full-time employment to mill workers. Worker-owners building asset wealth.