

Feed Me: Consumers Hunger for USA Made Goods



My local retail guy down at the Ranch and Feed store tells me that what he hears most is, “Don’t you have any boots that are made in the USA?” He chuckles, “I tell them we did, until their parents quit buying them!” He then waves his hand before his beloved shoe department, “We sell all the American footwear we can get.”

The movement back to American manufacturing is currently known as reshoring, lexicon that beautifully captures the geography of it all. The shift makes sense; USA corporations hold record amounts of cash; three out of four Americans now say they will pay more for domestic made goods, and the majority of 18-34 year olds think about the social ramifications of what they buy.

The idea that cheap, disposable goods poison our planet is not new, but combining the eco disaster

with the human suffering required to bring you the weekend sale flyer (“ALL AT 75% OFF!”) is beginning to creep into the collective consciousness. And it’s happening not just here, product bearing the ‘Made in America’ mark has a quality, dignity and charisma that is increasingly sought after in markets all over the world. The table is set for manufacturing to take off big time in this country.

So why is it that we don’t make more clothing? Domestic production clings to about 2 percent of the 20 billion or so garments consumed annually in this country, (those numbers are crazy and true) however, U.S. apparel manufacturing really isn’t growing like other major industries are.

One reason is our apparel factories are treated as contract labor, just like the Asian suppliers are; brands and start-ups want to

keep the current off-shore model and merely bring it here to the USA. Domestic apparel companies continue to look at production as an outsourced expense to be controlled, not as an investment that will return value to their product and company. Typically, apparel factories are the runt of the double margin litter; the brand and the retailer eat first. This keeps them cash poor and anxiety rich. Not a fun place to work, and certainly no place for a career.

In addition, smaller American apparel factories are overwhelmed by the modern world. They are missing a layer of professional merchandisers that is the norm overseas, and it seems many factories have no choice but to take on the simple, because there isn’t the intellectual support for the complex. Universally they are challenged by today’s style of communication, e.g. most of the little factories

I’ve met with don’t even answer the phone... much less respond to email. It all serves to keep them isolated and powerless.

American textile companies, who should be acting as a bridge to the future, don’t even know the names of the players downstream; they continue to act as if the supply chain ends at their shipping dock. Too long chasing the government contract grail, our textile industry must realize their real savior is the American consumer; who just wants a domestic choice on the shelf, and who also thinks that fabric and sewing are pretty much the same thing, by the way. The fate of the mills is in the hands of the garment makers.

Certainly there are markets that are hungry for clothing produced in the United States. The question is how long will it take for a new American apparel industry to work out the menu? ●