# The Sewn Product Manufacturing Industry in San Francisco: Challenges and Opportunities

Connie Ulasewicz, San Francisco State University, USA

Keywords: manufacturing, apparel, sewn, domestic

The United States garment and sewn products manufacturing industry is in a state of introspection. As the benefits for producing products offshore have decreased, the global desire for products “Made in America” has increased (Muir, Noll & Francis, 2012), yet the infrastructure for a rapid increase in onshore production is not in place. Despite the higher labor costs of producing goods in the United States, companies have endured, up-starts abound, and the San Francisco Bay Area, remains the third largest garment industry location in the United States behind New York and Los Angeles (Ioakimedes, 2012).

**Purpose -** The purpose of this study was to identify key factors that influence the decision makers in the garment and sewn products manufacturing industry in the San Francisco Bay Area, as a context for understanding where the industry is today, and as a foundation for making projections for its future. With a rich history of product houses and companies from the 1920’s, this region was the original west coast hub of millinery, fur, leisure wear and suiting for men and women (Lai& Jeung, 2008). In 2012, apparel and accessory manufacturing companies represented 40% of the San Francisco manufacturing sector, with an increase in design companies since 2009 (City and County of San Francisco, 2012). The projected reasons for this growth are varied, however recent developments include the higher costs of off shore production and the consumer desire for local manufacturing (Sofis, 2012). A current Bay Area industry concern rests in the actual business of producing the goods here (Tilley, 2012). Despite the importance of local manufacturing to the economic development of the Bay Area, the current research and trade literature is lacking in specific information as to how to assist, grow and keep this industry vibrant. It was anticipated that the data gathered in this research project would reveal insights regarding what has contributed to the sustainability of the garment industry in San Francisco and shed light on what professionals in the business believe about the local community’s ability to be competitive and profitable in a global market.

**Method -** Given the complexity of factors that inform the decisions that manufacturers make on a continual basis regarding where to produce their merchandise, dialogue, a qualitative methodology, was considered the most appropriate for this research (Forney, Rosen & Orzechowski, 1990). A single page questionnaire was developed, based on key factors identified in a current literature review of manufacturing issues. Interviewee’s responses were recorded in an audio format, capturing the true context of their replies and all additional discourse. The audio files were transcribed verbatim to allow for detailed content analysis, with each transcript analyzed and coded by question, and according to research objectives.

**Procedure** - Beginning in July 2012, 83 potential participants were asked to join in the study via an email invitation. Criteria for respondent selection included 1) the manufacturer headquarters was located in the Bay Area; 2) the manufacturer were cutting and sewing all or some part of their collection or line in the Bay Area currently, or had in the recent past; 3) the representative was the owner or decision maker regarding where products were cut and sewn. Fifty-one positive responses were received, the interview questions were emailed to the participants for their review and preparation, and appointments scheduled throughout August - December 2012. Each interview started with the signing of the IRB document, a formality that was greatly appreciated by each interviewee, as it appeared to validate the academic and official nature of the study. The total time commitment for the interviewee was anticipated to be 20-30 minutes; in actuality 40 minutes was the average time, due to their general enthusiasm and appreciation.

**Findings -** The SF Bay Area has and continues to be a vital manufacturing region with a focus on creating "honest" products designed for efficiency, with styles that are seasonless, made locally allowing for a quick turn, and more often sold directly to the consemer online and/or through independent boutique retailers. Of the 51 companies interviewed, 26 had been in business for 11 - 94 years, with 7 in their $6^{th}$-$10^{th}$ year, and 18 in their $1^{st}$-$5^{th}$ year of business, supporting the historic and continual growth of the industry. Recurring challenges, iterated by over 60% of the respondents included; the average age of the sewers estimated at late 40's to early 50's, the lack of training programs for sewers and cutters, old or lacking manufacturing machinery, and missing local resources including zippers, buttons, or machinery repair. Recurring themes for staying competitive and profitable in descending order of cumulative responses included the need for clarity in product focus, business ethics, controlling costs, controlling distribution channels, and customer focus.

**Implications** - Research implications revealed an implicit need to address workforce development and resource issues for the future sustainability of local manufacturing and its global distribution channels. The SF Bay area maintains an aging population of sewers and local manufacturers, soon to retire, potentially leaving a void of industry skill and knowledge. An opportunity exists to support local manufacturing, and the economic activities that it generates. Without the required infrastructure, projections for a solid sew products manufacturing industry in San Francisco are tenuous. Now is the time to engage in dialogue, to share the research questions and results from this study with those directly and indirectly involved, for comparison, resource sharing and growth of our sewn products manufacturing industry.

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