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DESERT DAHLS

Shooting its recent Resort 2022 campaign in a desert setting, Los Angeles-based Bella Dahl introduced pieces that promote comfort, beauty and sustainability and celebrate California sensibilities.

Find additional styles on page 6.

BELLA DAHL

INDUSTRY FOCUS: FINANCE

As the world navigates through the COVID-19 pandemic's new variants—and considers the potential spread of additional strains—what advice would you offer to apparel professionals?

By Dorothy Crouch *Managing Editor*

While a new year has begun, many challenges that were experienced during 2021 remain. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the world as new variants of the virus develop.

Following the November identification of the COVID-19 omicron variant, this form of the virus recently developed a sub-variant named BA.2. With the development of additional COVID-19 viral variants and sub-variants, professionals across industries have been tasked with continuing to work under different methods of conducting business and helping customers live within a world where the pandemic has

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TRADE-SHOW REPORT

Impressions Expo Returns to Long Beach for First In-Person Event in Two Years

By Tyler Shultz *Assistant Editor*

The **Long Beach Convention Center** in Long Beach, Calif., was once again home to **Impressions Expo**, returning for its first on-site show since the onset of the pandemic, attracting thousands of attendees to see the latest offerings from manufacturers and apparel companies.

"All of us at Impressions Expo were thrilled to bring the decorated-apparel and imprinted-products industry back together for an in-person event Jan. 21–23. Over the three days, the industry was able to reconnect, see the latest industry innovations, attend educational sessions and network with peers. It was great to see relationships rekindled," said Show

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Where fashion gets down to businessSM



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NRF Big Show Affords Insight, Guidance

During its Jan. 16–18 run at the **Javits Center** in New York City, the **NRF 2022 Retail's Big Show** was hosted under the theme of “Accelerate.” This 112th installment featured 190 sessions, more than 300 speakers and over 700 exhibitors, with an expanded Innovation Lab and Startup Zone, and three new pavilions.

Welcome and opening remarks were provided by Mike George, former NRF chairman and chief executive officer, and former president and CEO of **Qurate Retail Inc.**

“It has been two years since we gathered here in person. And together we have come through a remarkable set of challenges. In 2020, the pandemic put the world on hold. But retail, retail never stopped,” George said. “We kept moving forward, striving, evolving to meet the rapidly changing needs of our customers and our communities. We stepped up.”

Noting the challenges the industry continues to face including supply-chain obstacles, continued COVID-19 barriers and a labor market in which nearly 1 million retail jobs remain open, George was hopeful. This optimism was fueled partially by a 2021 November–December holiday season during which the NRF reported retail-sales growth of 14.1 percent over 2020 to \$886.7 billion.

“We have seen a tremendous recovery from the depth of the pandemic with year-over-year sales growth for 20 consecutive months. In fact, retail sales grew 14 percent in 2021,” George said. “That is the highest rate in over 20 years on top of 7 percent growth in 2020, all of it culminating in a record holiday season despite inflation, despite supply shortages, despite labor shortages and despite renewed concerns about the pandemic.”

The NRF revealed that it would be growing and evolving. In 2022, it will introduce two



Former NRF CEO Mike George delivered opening remarks, praising the resiliency of retailers, who “stepped up” to service their customers.

new events—the June **NRF Supply Chain 360**, which will take place in Cleveland with a focus on supply chain and sustainability. In July, **NRF Nexus** will be hosted in California with a focus on marketing, digital, technology and innovation professionals.

As interest in sustainability grows and pressure mounts on companies to adopt cleaner processes, the Big Show included discussions regarding steps toward greener practices. During the session “Reshaping Retail With Technology,” **IBM** Chief Executive Officer Arvind Krishna revealed how encouraging his partners to embrace sustainability is helping the company meet its goal to use 100 percent clean energy by 2030.

“When we began to look at this hard a few years ago, we discovered that about 30 percent of our energy usage was not necessary. So, 30 percent was not actually in terms of converting from non-clean to clean. Thirty percent was ‘Let’s just be much better in our footprint’ and then the remaining becomes—now that you’re using a smaller amount—you need less to clean,” Krishna explained. “If we say we only want to use clean, that way there is motivation for our partners to produce more clean energy.”—*Dorothy Crouch*

NEWS

Forever 21 Appoints Winnie Park New CEO

Forever 21 recently announced that Winnie Park has joined the fast-fashion brand as the new chief executive officer.

Park joined Forever 21 after serving as the CEO at **Paper Source** for six years, where she helped transform the brand from a bricks-and-mortar retailer to a lifestyle brand with a digital platform that spans social, digital content, online subscriptions and affiliate partnerships and also led the successful sale of the brand to an affiliate of **Barnes & Noble**. Prior to her role at Paper Source,



A self-described longtime shopper and admirer of Forever 21, Park, as its new CEO, will lead the “reinvigoration” of this iconic brand.

Park held executive positions across a variety of e-commerce, global marketing and fashion-merchandising companies, including spending nine years at the Hong Kong-based **DFS**, a division of **LVMH**.

“As a longtime shopper and admirer of the brand, I am honored to join Forever 21 at such a pivotal time of reinvention and reinvigoration,” Park said. “I am looking forward to partnering with this exceptional leadership team to continue the transformation of this brand with a focus on the Forever 21 community, including its people, purpose and business priorities across digital and traditional retail channels.”

Park is currently on the board and audit committee of **Dollar Tree** and is also on the board for **Women in Retail Leadership**. She has also served as an independent board director and member of the compensation and governance and audit committees for **Express**.

Previous Forever 21 CEO Daniel Kulle stepped down from the position after less than two years. Forever 21 was acquired by the **SPARC Group** for \$81 million in February 2020. Park will report to Marc Miller, CEO of SPARC.—*Tyler Shultz*

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Inside the Industry

The state of New York has introduced new legislation that will increase the urgency for fashion businesses to conduct their operations more responsibly. The Fashion Sustainability and Social Accountability Act would hold fashion retailers and manufacturers accountable for their sustainability practices. The legislation was introduced by Democratic New York State Senator Alessandra Biaggi and Democratic Assemblywoman Anna R. Kelles and would apply to global apparel and footwear companies with more than \$100 million in annual worldwide revenues that do business in the state of New York. If passed, companies would need to map at least 50 percent of their supply chain starting with the farms they get their raw materials from and disclose where in that chain they have the greatest social and environmental impact.

Azazie, a direct-to-consumer bridal and special-occasion dress brand, has announced a partnership with the nonprofit recycling charity organization Green Education Foundation. The partnership supports Azazie’s green initiatives by participating in the closed-loop recycling program for its unused products. The Green Education Foundation is one of the only organizations in the world using a process that reclaims 100 percent of the clothing fibers donated. Azazie will donate any end-of-life dresses and accessories to the recycling program.

International Market Centers has announced the hiring of Caroline Russell as the new design-services manager. In the position, Russell will be the direct contact between AmericasMart and the local design community with a focus on Open Year Round showrooms. She will also serve as concierge to visitors in the Designer Workspace, IMC’s designated area for designers to meet and conduct business. Russell will oversee the Designer Workspace daily and be available during the six Market Wednesday events of 2022, where buyers can shop all three AmericasMart buildings for gifts, accessories and home-furnishing items. Prior to joining IMC, Russell served as a client-services representative for Ferguson Enterprises. “Bringing Caroline on as our design-services manager will not only enhance our implementation of awareness for design-focused showrooms and drive attendance to Open Year Round events but also further AmericasMart’s position as the focal point of home and gift education,” said IMC Chief Executive Officer Bob Maricich.

Las Vegas Apparel is set to expand its showcase to 50 brands during its second semiannual buying event, more than doubling in size from its inaugural event. Buyers at the second event will be able to source immediates for Spring/Summer 2022 as well as Fall/Winter 2022. Las Vegas Apparel buyers will also have access to select World Market Center Las Vegas permanent showrooms. The main lobby will feature a Fashion Trend Gallery installation showcasing upcoming Fall/Winter 2022 trends. Las Vegas Apparel is also beginning the event with a Jonesy Wood 24k-gold permanent jewelry giveaway on Feb. 12 and is inviting attendees to watch the Super Bowl in a private watch party outdoors at the downtown Las Vegas Events Center.



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From Bridal to Evening, Katie May Returns to Her Elegant Looks

By Dorothy Crouch Managing Editor

Starting with a bridal-gown design shared on a **Pinterest** post that went viral, the **Katie May** brand began in 2012 from a foundation of creating garments in the United States. Eight years later, the business had expanded into eveningwear, but the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the country and apparel manufacturing—particularly for formalwear—shut down or shifted with the brand's founder, Katie May Neu, transitioning from the detailed work of designing elegant pieces to creating face masks that were made in Los Angeles.

"Overall, I am a designer, so I just like being able to create. You just need to put me in the lane you need me to swim in or drive in and I'll be there. With COVID, it was terrible, but there was still an opportunity for me to be creative and create product," May Neu explained. "That is what I did with the masks. I am grateful for whatever opportunity I get to create if I can make something people are happy with."

As the brand returns to its roots with the market for formalwear growing, Katie May is also celebrating its 10th anniversary. Reflecting on her business, which counts **Nordstrom** and **Revolve** as partners, May Neu relays a sense of pride when discussing Katie May's domestic production in Los

Angeles. These feelings stem from not only producing garments that reflect her vision but also relying on manufacturing partners whose workers are treated in accordance with May Neu's values, which require respectful treatment.

"For me, it means that I can create product in an environment that is aligned with my value set and what matters to me both on the social side of it with social ethics but also the quality side of product, which also really matters to me," May Neu explained. "We still run into hardships in Los Angeles. I have a compliance officer, my production manager, and I have a full-time field QC who just runs through shops because it's incredibly important to me that we are compliant not only by law but according to the social-ethics side as well."

Managing a responsible and ethical fashion line is important to May Neu as she seeks to shift the negative reputation the industry often receives. The designer is also quick to provide credit where it is due, noting that when she reaches a point where her expertise ends, she relies on her group of experienced team members to guide her decision-making.

"In manufacturing there is a lot of opportunity for abuses, and I think that manufacturing has had a really bad rep in the fashion industry," May Neu says. "We work together, but I

lean into a lot of people to be experts because I can't do it or I don't know it. Being able to lean into people who can give so much of themselves to this brand and my business—I really owe them a lot."

While May Neu has worked hard to build her brand, she emphasizes that her path was not the traditional road to fashion success. Bypassing design school, May Neu is a self-described "terrible artist," but she creates styles that make her happy and creates those looks. It is her hope that younger aspiring designers recognize that while an innate artist might not exist, diligence and remaining steadfast to pursue their dream career can lead to greatness.

"If you can find a mentor who can help you or prevent as many hiccups along the way it is something I would also highly recommend. From my point of view, if there is a girl or boy reading this that has doubts about their abilities because they have limitations—I had limitations, too," May Neu said. "I've done this for 10 years and it hasn't always been easy. There has been a lot of learning and lessons."

Katie May is available online at katiemay.com in addition to Nordstrom and Revolve. Evening is sized XS–XL and priced from \$200 for a cocktail design to \$525 for gown silhouettes. Bridalwear is priced from \$1,395 to \$2,995. ●

TRADE-SHOW REPORT

Impressions Expo

Continued from page 1

Director Russ Turner.

Michael Johnson, director of marketing at **Hanesbrands Inc.**, said this was the company's first trade show in two years, and it was nice to interact in person. Attendees were very hands-on with the company's products and asked a lot of questions. Hanesbrands went into the show with the goal of building brand awareness in addition to seeing new technologies being developed in the industry.

"Our goals were threefold: provide a showcase where printers could interact with our product launches from the past two years, build awareness of our brands **Alternative**, **Hanes**, **ComfortWash** and **Champion** with new customers, and learn what's new in the industry," Johnson said.

It was nice to see a good amount of business focused on making the industry better by providing sustainable solutions and products, added Johnson.

"There were a lot of businesses that were highly versed in sustainable materials, and we probably had the most traffic for our **Alternative** brand, which consists entirely of eco-friendly materials at an affordable price, something we like to call **Earthleisure**," Johnson said.

Los Angeles-based **Awkward Styles**, a print-on-demand, drop-shipping and fulfillment company also welcomed the return to in-person events. Social Media Specialist Alex Galindo said trade shows are important to the industry and that Impressions Expo was a great opportunity to meet with potential clients and partners in person as opposed to through email or on the phone. Galindo said digital customization was a popular topic and was seen throughout the showroom floor.

"Digital customization and decoration are getting very trendy. The ability to take a photo on your digital device, edit



Impressions Expo was held at the Long Beach Convention Center Jan. 21–23. Over the three days, event attendees were able to see the latest industry innovations and network with exhibitors.

it and have it printed on anything you like is very popular," Galindo said.

Anthony Jackson Jr. was attending the show from Memphis, Tenn., and said he felt like a kid in a candy store when presented with all of the incredible products and technologies at the event. Jackson runs his own business, **Prolific Hands**, where he creates custom crafted designs for apparel.

Jackson first heard of Impressions Expo through Stan Banks' T-Shirt Side Hustle, a program designed to help people start their T-shirt businesses. With his company beginning to gain traction, Jackson is building his customer base, so he wanted to attend the show for advice regarding the business's direction.

"I was hoping to meet Stan Banks if for nothing else than to say thanks for giving me the confidence to start my T-shirt business, and I got to do all of that and more! To meet one

of the men I admire the most in Stan Banks was a dream come true. Getting to talk to him and receive his advice I will never forget," Jackson said. "I also got to see Josh Ellsworth of **Stahls' Transfer Express** in action with the Hotronix 360 iQ Hat Heat Press. He even complimented my sublimated trucker hat!"

Jackson also mentioned the vast number of innovative technologies from companies including **Epson**, **OmniPrint**, **Crio** and **NUsign Supply** and how some of the wholesalers he met with opened his eyes to new possibilities for blanks.

As for new trends, Jackson said he noticed there were more direct-to-film printing companies exhibiting. According to Impressions Expo, DTF printing is the buzz in the decorated-apparel industry, and the event offered a great opportunity for companies to showcase their latest technologies in the space including printers, film, software and adhesive-

powder shakers.

"One thing I noticed was that there were so many DTF companies—way more than any other style of printing—proving that it is truly the new wave in the T-shirt industry," Jackson said.

John Drake, co-owner of **Quackerbox Creations, Ltd.**, in Dallas, along with his wife, Betsy, said they had attended the Long Beach **Imprinted Sportswear Shows** since 2010, before the rebrand to Impressions Expo. John and Betsy started their business in 1982, where they mainly print T-shirts and apparel for advertising specialty companies but also work with some local businesses and schools.

"The big trend this year is DTF. We went specifically to research suppliers and machinery for DTF," Drake said. "We've used outside vendors to make transfers for the last year but are investigating whether to print them in-house." ●

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TECHNOLOGY



E-commerce and technology-solutions provider ShipMonk has announced the acquisition of third-party logistics technology company Ruby Has Fulfillment. The acquisition will aid ShipMonk in further expanding throughout the United States in addition to internationally.

ShipMonk Acquires Ruby Has Fulfillment

By Tyler Shultz Assistant Editor

E-commerce and technology-solutions provider **ShipMonk** has announced the acquisition of the third-party logistics technology company **Ruby Has Fulfillment**. The acquisition will aid ShipMonk in further expanding throughout the United States in addition to increasing its reach globally.

Founded in 2014, ShipMonk offers technology-driven fulfillment solutions for small and medium-sized e-commerce businesses. Over the past 18 months the company has raised \$355 million in funding aimed at accelerating growth and expansion. ShipMonk expanded into Mexico in October 2021 with the acquisition of **El Mar Logistics—Mexico**, a Tecate, Mexico-headquartered fulfillment center. With the Ruby Has acquisition, ShipMonk now has North American operations from Canada to Mexico.

Through its recent Ruby Has acquisition, ShipMonk added 1.3 million square feet of warehouse space to its resources. This addition brings ShipMonk's total warehouse space to over 2.4 million square feet. The acquisition also added eight fulfillment centers across the U.S. and in Canada and the United Kingdom. ShipMonk currently operates 11 distribution centers. Ruby Has Sure Shot technology joins ShipMonk's warehouse-technology suite.

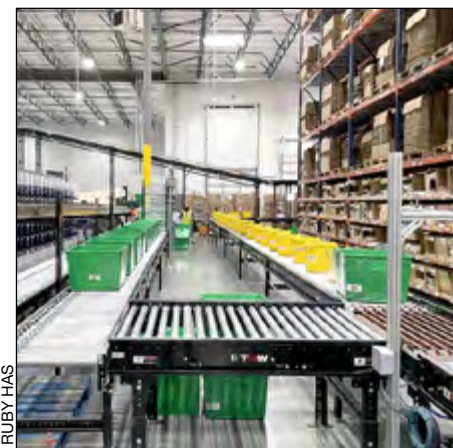
ShipMonk currently serves over 2,000 business-to-consumer companies, including **BrüMate**, **Liquid IV** and **FEAT** and adds both larger operations and established business-to-business brands by way of the Ruby Has client base. The company's workforce has more than doubled since January 2021, and the Ruby Has acquisition adds over 700 new employees to ShipMonk.

Rafael Zakinov, founder and chief executive officer of Ruby Has, will join ShipMonk as the chief product officer. The acquisition closed in November 2021. ShipMonk plans to continue its international expansion, including operating a European warehouse, in 2022.

Ruby Has had a busy 2021, consisting of a few acquisitions and partnerships of its own as it continued to grow to better serve its clients. The company was founded in 2011 and provides e-commerce fulfillment services to over 400 businesses in six states.

In May 2021, Ruby Has acquired **Boss Logistics**. The two companies had previously worked together, and the acquisition was based on the right fit, from the people and clients to the location, capabilities and company culture.

"We have done a number of acquisitions, and Boss Logistics is the second one we have executed within a 12-month period. The Boss acquisition is solidly within our hybrid growth strategy and brings great clients,



Ruby Has had a busy 2021, consisting of a few acquisitions and partnerships of its own as it continued to grow to better serve its clients. The company was founded in 2011 and provides e-commerce-fulfillment services to over 400 businesses in six states.

employees and capabilities into the Ruby Has family," said Ruby Has President and Chief Operating Officer Esther Kestenbaum Prozan last May.

In June, the e-commerce fulfillment provider partnered with **Brightpearl**, which allowed Ruby Has to utilize Brightpearl's digital-operations platform built for omnichannel merchants. In the same month, Ruby partnered with **Happy Returns**, which offers software and reverse logistics that automate the returns process, to improve efficiency after integrating with its returns-processing systems.

"We're thrilled to partner with two amazing companies that work as hard as we do to help DTC brands grow," said Matt Carpentieri, vice president of global partnerships at Ruby Has. "We share the same vision to go above and beyond for our clients every day and look forward to offering our clients increased efficiencies to power their supply-chain operations."

In December, Kestenbaum Prozan told *California Apparel News* that apparel companies should consider the capabilities of third-party partners when looking for new technologies to invest in to help their companies grow in 2022.

"Apparel businesses should think deeply about technology-enabled services overall and specifically about the technology capabilities of third-party e-commerce fulfillment providers. It's not enough to have the right technology if it doesn't integrate with the provider. Invest in a relationship with a fulfillment provider who has a robust and comprehensive set of integrations with every platform and utilizes seamless e-commerce demands. Also look for intelligent use of automation and robotics such as world-class sortation systems that can bring speed as well as economies of scale," Kestenbaum Prozan said. ●

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Sustainability On Trend for Spring in Bella Dahl Resort Collection

Creating its new Resort collection for spring, **Bella Dahl** set its sights on designing light pieces that make a statement in soft fabrics and fashionable styles. The pieces that rely on easy dressing afford beautiful silhouettes yet are fun to wear while looking forward to warmer weather on sunny days.

With a focus on fashion, the brand sought to offer stylish comfort that is also sustainable, made responsibly through practices that are more ecologically sound. The collection relies on **Lenzing EcoVero's** viscose, which yields a lower environmental impact than the traditional fiber. In addition to Lenzing's EcoVero, Bella Dahl also sourced Tencel Lyocell

from the Austrian fiber producer. To achieve the collection's soft colors, which complement the light spring pieces, the brand embraced hand-dye techniques. Certain pieces from the collection were manufactured domestically with production taking place in Los Angeles, the city in which the brand is headquartered.

To round out its natural inspiration for the collection, Bella Dahl based its color palette on scenes from Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California. With an earthy blush tone in dusty rose, a blue hue in sky fall and an updated tie-dye in indigo stripe, the collection showcases the beauty of

the Southern California natural desert landscape.

The collection's campaign relays a sense of freedom outdoors in the sunny desert while exploring the beautiful, yet rugged landscape. Set amid soaring mountains, dusty earth and adobe structures, models showcase the brand's pieces while traversing terrain dotted with vegetation including Joshua trees, creosote bush, dogwood, Mojave yucca and chuparosa, relaying a carefree day scaling the area's boulders while dressed in easy, stylish garments.

Available online through belladahl.com, the collection is sized XS-L and priced \$123-\$242 retail.—*Dorothy Crouch*



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As the world navigates through the COVID-19 pandemic's new variants—and considers the potential spread of additional strains—what advice would you offer to apparel professionals?

Finance *Continued from page 1*

become part of life.

With the approach of the two-year anniversary of COVID-19 lockdowns in the United States, many lessons have been learned within the fashion industry regarding conducting business according to pandemic guidelines. Looking back on the lessons learned from the last two years of an apparel industry under COVID-19, *California Apparel News* asked financial-industry experts: *As the world navigates through the pandemic's new variants—and considers the potential spread of additional strains—what advice would you offer to apparel professionals?*

Darrin Beer Western Regional Manager CIT Commercial Services



The apparel and retail sectors have shown great resiliency beginning with temporary business closures in 2020, the slow reopening of the economy, the delta-variant wave and now omicron. While all of this was happening, supply-chain challenges developed in addition to labor shortages and cost increases.

In terms of preparation, it seems the best course of action is to be ready for anything. It appears the number of omicron cases is beginning to decline in several states, but the reality is other variants could emerge.

Some of our clients are working through fall inventory that was delivered late. Fortunately, in most cases the retailers are taking in the product, but there have been some cancellations.

Ultimately, properly managing inventory levels is important. Many companies will decide to purchase goods early this year to counter some of the logistic and port challenges. Maintaining adequate capital and financial liquidity is imperative to be able to react to future market disruptions. Finally, retailers and wholesalers should continue to watch news developments closely and be prepared to make further mid-course adjustments as circumstances dictate.

Mark Bienstock Managing Director Express Trade Capital



Apparel professionals understand that they usually experience more difficult times than good times. This is a positive trait as they become nimbler in working through these unprecedented times of the ongoing COVID spread. One of the key areas of concern relates to the inventory levels and timely receipt of merchandise. Navigating the timing is critical as many apparel companies are

extremely seasonal in nature and any delay throughout the supply chain can cause ripple effects. We suggest that our clients be extremely proactive bringing in inventory as early as possible for the upcoming season while continually monitoring the external COVID developments in planning their future inventory purchases.

Sydnee Breuer Executive Vice President Western Region Manager Rosenthal & Rosenthal



If there is anything that the last two years has taught us it's that businesses need to be flexible and to pivot based on the latest information. It doesn't work to say, "We've been successful in the past so we don't need to change" or "That's how we have always done it."

Unfortunately, the supply-chain issues persist and are expected to for the foreseeable future. So, just-in-time inventory that worked seamlessly for many years doesn't anymore. But you can't have too much inventory either as the buying whims of the consumer change. It's a delicate balance, for sure!

It also seems likely that there will be more COVID variants ongoing. The supply chain needs to be more diverse so that should one particular factory or area of the world be affected—or worse, shut down again—it won't wreak havoc on the flow of goods and timely shipping. Instead of having just one source or importing from just one country, it would be wise to expand the vendor base to minimize this risk.

Of course, it's easier said than done. Having a trusted financial partner in your corner is key. As PPP money winds down and the costs of doing business continue to increase, having access to working capital will be invaluable to sustain continued growth and get through what looks like another challenging year.

Flexibility, staying on top of the issues, pivoting when necessary and communication with your financial partner should provide the best chance for survival in these crazy times.

Scott Carpenter Chief Executive Officer B. Riley Retail Solutions



The retail world got turned on its ear in 2020 and 2021—and I don't expect things will change soon. In 2020 we became flooded with liquidation projects due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the early days of the pandemic, every retailer felt the stress of temporary closures. Retailers who were already under financial distress had difficulty holding on. Consumers and store staffs became wary of shopping and

contracting the virus. Sales declined and many left the workforce creating a shortage of workers. But not all retailers felt the same pain: Grocery stores, sporting goods and home goods experienced record sales as people stayed home.

There's more trouble ahead, so what to do? First, if you don't have a strong e-commerce channel, you better get one—online buying has exploded over the last two years and is here to stay. Next, aggressively address your supply-chain issues. Retailers need multiple sources of goods. If you are still relying on goods manufactured from one source then you remain at the whim of continued plant closures due to virus spikes and raw-material shortages. Thirdly, address the worker shortage. Having goods to sell does little good if you can't pack and ship the orders or get your goods on retail shelves. You will likely have to pay higher rates or offer better benefits or become more flexible with schedules. Unfortunately, there are no "quick fixes," but those who have persevered share common traits.

Gino Clark Executive Vice President and Managing Director Los Angeles Region Manager White Oak Commercial Finance, LLC



If there is one thing the pandemic has proven over the past two years it is its ability to throw a curveball. It is critical for industry professionals to remain diligent to keep employees and partners healthy and safe. There are many things that companies cannot control in this current environment, from supply-chain disruptions to staffing shortages, but no one can afford to let their guards down on proactive safety

measures that help keep operations moving as smoothly as possible.

Given market uncertainties, apparel companies should continue to focus on what they do best. Now is not the time to venture into uncharted territory or make speculative purchases. No one knows what awaits the industry in the months ahead so it is best to concentrate your efforts on the things your business already does well, perhaps fine-tuning certain systems and processes to find efficiencies, and make sure any investments or expenditures are consistent with your business model. In this dynamic economy, companies need to be nimble and prepared to adapt quickly to changing conditions. With COVID-19, change is inevitable.

To get ready for whatever lies ahead, you should take the necessary steps now to manage your assets, keep a strong balance sheet and confirm your financial reporting is up to date. You should also make sure you have excess availability on your credit line to help bridge temporary setbacks and take advantage of growth opportunities necessary to stay competitive.

Having a credit facility that is flexible and can expand or contract depending upon business needs is important.

Eric Fisch Senior Vice President, National Sector Head, Retail and Apparel HSBC Bank USA N.A.



The apparel industry entered 2022 with positive momentum. Demand has exceeded expectations throughout the pandemic, and that remained the case during the 2021 holiday season.

Additionally, product scarcity has led to more full-priced sales and fewer discounts, markdowns and closeouts. For the first time in decades we have also seen material price increases due to higher production and shipping costs. In my year-end discussions with wholesalers and retailers, they looked to 2022 with optimism, expecting these favorable trends to continue at least through the end of the year.

Omicron has certainly impacted some of that optimism, with fewer in-person shoppers to begin the year and less tourism in major urban areas. With that said, I believe the fundamental strength we saw in the sector in 2021 will carry through the current year. Many of the positive underlying factors remain the same. The economy continues to steadily improve, with consistent employment gains. Consumers have shifted spend from leisure and entertainment to product purchases. Supply remains scarce due to production and shipping delays throughout the world, which means consumers will be less discerning when they find what they are looking for. All of this points to another strong year ahead albeit with some headwinds at the start due to the current surge in infections.

While I think this argument bolsters the case for apparel companies to move ahead with plans for growth, I would be remiss if I didn't note the risks inherent in the current environment. The industry still faces many of the same



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As the world navigates through the COVID-19 pandemic's new variants—and considers the potential spread of additional strains—what advice would you offer to apparel professionals?

Finance *Continued from page 8*

challenges as pre-pandemic. The shift from bricks and mortar to e-commerce continues, with more retail closures expected. The industry and the consumer are slowly coming to realize the scale of its environmental impact, and meaningful resolutions are still in their infancy. The price increases I mentioned earlier are expected to continue in 2022 and will at some point give the consumer pause. Ultimately, all of these challenges are easy to manage when product is scarce and demand is high. If that consumer demand dips at some point in the near future, we will risk significant damage to the performance of retailers and wholesalers who have geared up production for a strong year. My advice would be to continue to produce for growth while having a plan in place if inventory levels suddenly start growing.

Joshua Goodhart Executive Vice President and National Sales Manager Merchant Financial Group



The COVID-19 environment changed everything not only for the apparel business but also for businesses around the world. Merchant advised clients and our extended network to develop backup plans, continue to adapt, communicate and pursue strategic partnerships. It is essential to be nimble and flexible to the ever-changing retail environment as unpredictable events are inevitable and not all

goes according to plan.

Before COVID-19, the retail and wholesale business already had its challenges. Adding in the lack of in-person gatherings, the pandemic only heightened industry problems—the lack of store foot traffic, supply-chain issues, shipping delays, empty shelves, lack of workers and several other contributors. This pandemic and its latest variants caused supply-chain issues we've never seen in our lifetime. What we are experiencing today will not be something that goes away overnight. We live in an uncertain world, and it's difficult to predict the short-term and long-term effects on the apparel industry.

Apparel professionals must prepare for all scenarios—best and worst. The apparel companies that will continue to grow and thrive will be omni-channel businesses that are open-minded and initiate creative solutions to new industry caveats. The omni-channel model is essential to compete in today's environment. Buyers enjoy the in-person shopping experience, but they also appreciate the convenience of mobile-phone shopping and Amazon Prime. Manufacturers must expand and develop their sourcing networks and strengthen relationships with retail partners. The workforce is native to being in-person, specifically the apparel industry workforce. How could we imagine merchandising products virtually? This industry is navigating working remotely and will continue to improve its practices with time. Some improvements will include implementing new tech systems and creating strategic partnerships with companies that can improve operations. Merchant urges apparel businesses to keep overhead at a minimum and consider mergers, acquisitions and partnership opportunities.

Lastly, we believe now more than ever that it is essential to have a close-knit team of advisers in place to help businesses navigate the waters. A strong group of like-minded professionals with different skill sets like working-capital lenders, accountants and attorneys will help any apparel business through these times and help them reach their operational and financial goals.

Rob Greenspan President and Chief Executive Greenspan Consult, Inc.



At this point in time it feels like the "same ol', same ol'." We are now approaching two years and still counting of the pandemic. And, yes, in many instances things have improved, but we are still fighting variants of this virus, which means people are still resistant to traditional bricks-and-mortar shopping. The impact on apparel manufacturers and importers is still being felt throughout the industry.

As always, personnel are critical for the success of the business. Companies must retain their key employees. This includes continuing to find ways for employees to periodically work from home as well as to come into their offices. Companies must also find ways to keep their employees compensated. This might include increased benefits, vacation time or remote-work schedules.

Developing, investing and growing the e-commerce side of the business is vital to long-term success. This can be accomplished by having your own e-commerce site if applicable or selling to e-commerce retailers.

Maintaining realistic gross-profit margins is critical for continued success. With all the supply-chain issues that companies are dealing with including drastically increased shipping costs, companies must find ways to maintain their gross-profit margins. Collaborating with suppliers for cost reductions, finding alternative sources of production or trying to increase prices are all areas that apparel companies must work through to maintain adequate profit margins.

Liquidity is of critical importance. Maintaining proper inventory levels—closing out old or obsolete inventory—is vital for having adequate liquidity. Do not be too dependent on your lender for financing. That is a risk not worth taking.

Martin Hughes Partner Moss Adams



We all have seen some crazy times over the past two years with the COVID pandemic and then the subsequent variants and who knows what comes next. That said, apparel companies have been able to pivot really well during this time. The e-commerce distribution channel has seen significant growth and become the largest distribution channel for most of our apparel clients.

This trend will continue into 2022 and beyond as the consumer has become very comfortable shopping online.

The focus should be on building a digital platform that provides a great selection of product, is user friendly and engages the customer at the first click. While the bricks-and-mortar channels are resurging and growing, they may never get back to pre-pandemic levels. Inventory management is always key, especially in today's dominant DTC world.

Supply-chain management should also be a focus, especially given all the supply-chain issues we have seen over the past year. Looking for alternative factories overseas to supplement production needs or to spread out production over various factories is recommended. Being concentrated in one or a few factories can cause product delivery issues if we see more delays at the ports or future variants causing workforce issues at the factories. Lastly, we have all seen significant workforce issues and needs over the past two years, and today it is very much an employee's market. The employer of choice will need to provide significant flexibility with respect to work hours, a hybrid work model with respect to working from home and at the office, and compensation and benefits will continue to be extremely competitive.

Richard Kwon Executive Vice President Portfolio Manager Finance One, Inc.



The spread of omicron and additional COVID-19 strains will further delay the recovery of the global supply-chain crisis, which contributed to the United States' inflation rate rising to a 40-year high of 7 percent at the end of 2021. Domestically, congestion at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the two largest ports in the U.S., hasn't improved despite the best efforts of top authorities. The number of ships

anchored outside the ports waiting for a berthing spot during January was 100 compared to 55 in 2021 and 23 in 2020. Around 1,700 dockworkers at the West Coast ports tested positive for COVID-19 in January alone, exceeding total infections for all of 2021, which led to many absences at a time when every dockworker is needed to reduce congestion. Internationally, a short supply of shipping services and containers is expected to trail well into 2022, continuously exposing apparel importers to overinflated container shipping costs.

By now, apparel companies would have experienced unprecedented frequency and magnitude of supply-chain and logistics issues brought on by the pandemic. Relentlessly reviewing and improving supply-chain networks, identifying vulnerabilities and updating logistics contingency plans for alternate modes/ports/providers, forecasting appropriate inventory levels, clearly conveying expectations in real time to buyers and suppliers alike when challenges arise are some of the ways for apparel companies to minimize disruptions and build operational resilience.

Robert Meyers President Republic Business Credit, LLC



It continues to have a déjà-vu feeling on the challenge front as we head into the spring and summer season instead of the new year that many apparel manufacturers sought across the country. Those challenges include supply chain, rising material costs, labor costs, container costs, port delays, delayed shipping and fluctuating consumer confidence as the pandemic continues to have an

impact around the world.

Apparel companies must remain adaptable and flexible while focusing on what they are able to control. If you haven't already, it would be a good time to revisit your credit and factoring agreements to make sure they are structured for your evolving customer and business needs. I would take advice from other entrepreneurs, lawyers and accountants along with your factoring company to ensure you are getting well-rounded information. My strongest advice is to not attempt to tackle this year alone but form a counsel of close advisers that you stay in regular contact with to confront the many challenges on the horizon. Regardless of what COVID-19 has in store for 2022, it is always best to have plans for success to go along with the many backup plans we have all resorted to in the past two years. Supply-chain issues are going to linger, but I know the apparel community will thrive together.

David M. Reza
Senior Vice President Western Region
Milberg Factors, Inc.



Fortunately, all business managers and leaders in all industries, not just apparel, can access a wealth of information from government, public-health, medical and media resources on how best to operate during this pandemic.

If asked, we would remind owners and managers to comply with all federal, state and local regulations. Businesses should also make staff physical and

mental health a priority and require vaccinations and boosters for in-person work. Additionally, employers should offer a hybrid work schedule, balancing in-person and virtual or remote attendance. Be flexible as the COVID/public-health environment continues to be fluid.

There should be efforts to proactively communicate with staff, customers, vendors and logistics providers. Focus should be placed on creating the most robust and resilient supply chain and inventory-management system as is possible within your means. Companies that deliver product as per their commitments are delivering certainty to their customers.

Product and track records are important selling points, but they are not enough. Investing in technology will help suppliers to develop a better understanding of their customers, resulting in stronger and more collaborative relationships.

Kevin Sullivan
Executive Vice President
Western Region Manager
Wells Fargo Commercial Capital



Most of our clients have continued to navigate through COVID-19 in as positive a manner as possible. The biggest obstacle right now remains the continued impact on logistics. It's imperative that apparel companies do whatever is necessary to negotiate costs down to the extent possible as the increases have led to some pretty clear margin erosion throughout the industry. It's also important

that apparel companies value their suppliers and work closely with them in navigating through any COVID-related issues.

The next piece relates to continually building strong relationships with customers. Most retailers have generally been understanding of shipping delays, but many in the industry remain somewhat wary of the potential for chargebacks, particularly as they relate to highly seasonal goods. It helps having strong long-term relationships with customers.

Finally, the various COVID-related issues that have hit the industry can sometimes lead to cash crunches. If an apparel company knows that supply-chain disruptions will impact cash flow, it's best to sit down with your lender as soon as possible to discuss it. We've helped many of our clients who've run into cash-flow issues with support above and beyond what they would typically need. Most lenders have a pretty broad view of the industry, so there's an understanding that these remain exceptional times. The odds are pretty good that the challenges that an apparel company is facing today due to COVID-related issues may not be unique to that business. Lenders understand this and are willing to help. The key lies in early communication and the ability to put together a cash-flow projection that clearly illustrates the issue, which allows a lender to help formulate a solution.

Kenneth L. Wengrod
Managing Member
Stealth Management Group LLC



It's time to recognize that COVID and its mutated variants are going to be permanently part of our daily lives. We need to adjust to this phenomenon and deal with it.

The pandemic's impact has conditioned us to maximize the importance of productivity and understanding of the importance of minutiae. Owners and managers of apparel firms need to pay attention to details, something people tend to shy away from. Retailers cancel

orders even though they may be ready for shipment. This places a severe burden on the apparel company and the workers in its supply chain. Apparel professionals need to remain vigilant and proactive to avoid problems. I recommend carefully reviewing the purchase order to determine if the language outlines protective measures, such as a force majeure, cancellations and disputes.

In today's environment, survival and growth rely on the swift assessment of the dynamics of the entire landscape, that is, from the supply chain to its ultimate customer.

These days, prioritize the ability to improve productivity. Reduce the cycle time of manufacturing and shipping. Finally, companies should focus less on manufacturing labor costs. There is no question that the transportation costs of imports have risen sharply with container costs rising from \$7,500 per container to over \$25,000 per container. During pre-COVID life, shipping companies' owners of vessels and terminals were losing money. On the flip side, the same shipping companies are making billions, presently, from these port delays. Charging importers extra fees for these delays has had a huge impact.

Now may be the time to closely reexamine apparel imports from Asia. Think more along the lines of manufacturing in our hemisphere. Benefits from USMCA may be cost justified in labor and shipping, with shorter lead times to boot.

Today is not about economies of scale and producing for large runs. It's about timely reaction to market demands and creating demand with lower inventory levels. Consumers want what they can't get. ●

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Secure Your Financing Before Interest Rates Increase

By Gino Clark and Mike Earnhart *White Oak Commercial Finance*

Inflation is ubiquitous in today's news. Prices are on the rise across the economy, impacting everything from raw materials to labor to shipping. We are hearing lots of questions from apparel companies wanting to know how they can best adapt to the increasing inflationary pressures on their businesses, particularly in light of anticipated interest-rate hikes. As we have learned throughout the Age of COVID, a smart—but flexible—financing strategy is key.

First, let's consider what we know.

Labor shortages are driving wages higher. Finding and retaining qualified workers is harder than ever, as is the daily struggle for companies to keep their workforces safe, healthy, and productive to meet delivery schedules.

Other inflationary impacts, such as transportation costs, are also increasing, often dramatically. In some cases, it is not just a matter of companies having to pay higher prices for materials but whether they can secure these materials at all. Production shutdowns, shipping delays, and bottlenecks at ports are all leading to a slower flow of goods and higher costs at every step in the process.

Next, let's look at what we don't know. It is a growing list:

How long will prices continue to rise and how high will they go? Is this the "new normal" or will costs eventually return to their pre-COVID levels?

What happens to companies that are unable to meet their retail customers' delivery dates? Do they miss an entire season? If a style is time-dependent, do they resort to markdowns or do they need to write off the inventory completely?

Will companies be able to manufacture their goods at a price that will match demand? Will customers be willing to pay a higher price for their goods? Or will reduced spending power and customer demand ultimately lead cash-strapped apparel businesses to fail?

All this uncertainty requires companies to have a strong, proactive financial plan. And it cannot wait.

"CPI has touched 7 percent," said Gregory Stilson, an economist and Managing Director and Portfolio Manager at White Oak Global Advisors, LLC. "Combine that with a Wall Street consensus of five or more interest-rate hikes by year-end and it is quite likely that access to, and the cost of, capital is going to be far different than it has been since the beginning of the pandemic. Now is the time for businesses to take a long, hard look at their capital structure and working-capital needs. As rates rise and lower-tier consumer segments feel the inflation pinch, the total

pool of available credit will shrink, and access will become more difficult. Therefore, companies should be far more proactive in securing their access to financing in what could be a challenging 2022 and 2023."

After so many years of record low interest rates and nominal inflation, this is new territory for a lot of businesses. In fact, many of today's apparel manufacturers and importers have little to no experience managing their businesses



Gino Clark



Mike Earnhart

in an inflationary environment. This makes maintaining financial flexibility and access to credit-based capital of paramount importance. The right mix of short-, medium- and long-term financing using both fixed and floating strategies can help mitigate the effects of the highest rates of inflation the U.S. has seen in 40 years.

Long-term financing may become more difficult for some apparel businesses to obtain based upon the nature of their business. However, those with receivables, inventory, and intellectual property will be in a stronger position to leverage those assets and help bridge potential price increases while passing along the increased prices to the consumer.

The key to success is acting now. Companies should be proactively reaching out to their lending partners. Waiting to speak with your lenders will only narrow the available options as rates increase throughout 2022 and beyond. Nimble specialty lenders offer a unique solution to address price volatility, including those that offer asset-based lending (ABL) and factoring.

In summary, the combination of today's market challenges has created a perfect storm that the apparel industry must face head on to not only survive but come out stronger when the clouds break. While it is uncertain as to when inflationary pressures will go away, there's no better time than now to work with your lender to develop the right plan unique to your business's near- and long-term goals.

Executive Vice President Gino Clark and Managing Director of Originations Mike Earnhart are financial industry veterans with White Oak Commercial Finance, an affiliate of White Oak Global Advisors.



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Surf Expo Brings Together Brands, Buyers, Changemakers for Good Business

By Dorothy Crouch Managing Editor

At its recent January edition, the **Emerald**-produced board- and ocean-sports show **Surf Expo** returned to the **Orange County Convention Center** in Orlando, Fla., welcoming buyers, brands, ocean conservationists and those who embrace the surf and beach culture.

"Surf Expo was excited to once again bring the watersports, beach and resort communities together for a great trade show to meet face to face to discuss solutions, create new partnerships, launch and/or find new products, write orders, and strengthen our community," said Surf Expo Senior Vice President and Show Director Roy Turner. "Our retail sector continues to be strong, yet like other industries we are struggling with the supply chain as well as the day-to-day challenges that COVID continues to present. We are excited to see the show continuing to gain momentum as we head into our September 2022 edition."

For Laurel Jones, founder and owner of **Swimwear Solution** in Overland Park, Kan., the Jan. 5-7 show provided a cheerful environment to conduct serious business as she shopped for swimwear and resort-style dresses. Jones noted that she felt there had been growth since the previous edition of Surf Expo. In addition to her usual stops including **Jantzen** and **Manhattan Beachwear**, Jones made a few stops that were new for her store including **Dolma** and **Simpatiko** that would price at retail for Resort under \$100 and swim under \$200.

"All the vendors were just really happy, and they were really accommodating," Jones said. "Attending a show like this is really important. I don't think you can do your best job by just ordering stuff online or from some catalog. I am old school about it. I like to touch and feel products. I've done this going on 34 years now, and it's [also] about the relationships that you build with the vendors."

After nearly two years of consumers opting for leggings and sweatpants, Jones noted a readiness to buy goods that would promote optimism and an attraction toward having fun again. As she shopped for April, May, June and July deliveries, Jones wanted colorful items. Revealing that she realizes that her clients might not share her affinity



SURF EXPO

During its Jan. 5-7 run, Surf Expo hosted buyers and brands from the watersports, board-sports and beach categories at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Fla., for a bit of fun and fashion while conducting business.

for bold prints, Jones did want to offer colors that promote happiness.

"Some people were doing imports such as embroidered tunics, or just tunics, or button-front shirts made out of cotton but with tropical prints—something fun, colorful and happy," Jones said. "Not everyone is as print happy as I am. Some people are print shy, but I just feel when you're going to a warm, tropical place you want to have some color."

At the Boca Raton, Fla., eco-focused brand **Hülya Swim**, Chief Executive Officer and founder Hannah Patten noticed buyer movement toward bolder patterns from retailers in all regions of Florida and all the way up the East Coast through Maryland, New Jersey and New York. Buyers did not seem to mind Hülya Swim's increased wholesale pricing from \$35 to \$65 due to inflation.

"I have this one pattern that is going to be part of my new collection that is dropping in June. I call it the Tiger Beach Print because it is sunset colors, and it has a palm tree and shark fin in black. That was my most popular print. That, and I had a groovy back-in-the-day surfer print that people were absolutely loving," Patten said. "People are now shifting to a

point where they want prints."

As the owner of an ecologically mindful brand, Patten was happy to see that space was made for a number of nonprofit organizations whose missions are focused on conservation, charity, education and responsibility in the action-sports industry. Representing a number of causes, the show's nonprofit roster included the **Board Retailers Association**, **Christian Surfers United States**, the **Clearwater Marine Aquarium Research Institute**, **Grind for Life**, the **National Surf Schools & Instructors Association**, the **Orlando Surfrider Foundation**, the **Palm Beach County Surfing History Project**, **Ride Nature**, **Salty Science**, the **Surf Industry**

Manufacturers Association and the **East Coast Surfing Hall of Fame**, which hosted its 2022 induction ceremony as it celebrated its 25th anniversary at the show on Jan. 5.

For Compton, Calif.'s **Katin** brand, Vice President of Sales Dale Rhodes reported a strong show. While Rhodes noted that Surf Expo always provides an excellent turnout, he also felt traffic increased during this edition compared to the September show. Searching for Fall and Holiday, buyers were interested in Katin's jackets in rust colors, navy, kelp red and dark clay and flannels in rice paper, cool gray and vintage white. Opening five or six new accounts, Katin saw around 50 accounts during the show as buyers from the East Coast, Midwest, California and Hawaii stopped by from the **Ron Jon Surf Shop**, **Palmetto Moon**, **Surf Serious**, the **Heritage Surf Shop**, **Shore** and **Hi Tech Surf Sports**.

"Surf Expo is a heritage show. It's been around forever. It's a staple in our industry. It brings the best brands from all over the country, and it brings in and yields the best retailers," Rhodes said. "It's a great community, and it's a great meeting spot to see great product." ●

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Fashion Dallas Market Center

www.dallasmarketcenter.com
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Market Center brings together thousands of manufacturers and key retailers in an elevated trade-show environment. Featuring 500 permanent showrooms and over 1,000 temporary booths, including expanded contemporary lines and resources, the Dallas Market Center is where inspiration starts. Upcoming events include the Apparel & Accessories Market on March 22–25.

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IFJAG trade shows feature fashion jewelry and accessories from around the world. It features over 120 manufacturers or direct importers with exclusive designs to our unique venue of private showrooms which offer buyers a professional environment. The upcoming Las Vegas show runs Feb. 12–15, 2022, at the Embassy Suites Hotel so you'll have plenty of time to stop by while you're in the area. You can preregister at our website. We welcome new exhibitors who would like to participate in our show. We offer buyers complimentary lunch and local transportation reimbursement.

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www.LasVegas-Apparel.com
International Market Centers, producer of Atlanta Apparel, presents Las Vegas Apparel. Buyers and exhibitors can come together Feb. 12–14 in sunny Las Vegas at the Expo at World Market Center Las Vegas to do business in our industry's growing categories of young contemporary, accessories, and more, plus buyers can visit gift showrooms on campus for even more buying options. Get an exclusive look at apparel's new home on the West Coast where we'll be extending the hospitality you know and love all the way to Las Vegas.

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Asher Fabric Concepts is proud to announce its new division Asher LA, a wholesale elevated blanks brand, cut and sewn in Los Angeles. The sustainable blanks are offered in Supima & BCI cotton. With over 13 million tons of waste across the fashion industry, Asher LA makes it a focal point to shift the industry standard by using eco-friendly raw materials such as organic cotton, recycled cotton, and recycled polyester. The company repurposes its excess fabric production into its blanks line instead of creating waste. The blanks are produced with high-quality sewing, in-house design services such as state-of-the-art digital printing, embroidery, and garment dye — all of which can aid a client's brand in taking designs to the next level. For over 30 years, attention to detail has been the core of the company's DNA. Over 100-plus employees across Asher's knitting mill and sewing factory work to ensure each product is 100 percent vertical; every garment offered is knit, cut, sewn, dyed and pressed at its Los Angeles-based warehouse. No business is too big or small for Asher LA and the company is happy to offer products with no minimums. Customers have the option to purchase in-stock products on demand with in-stock or custom colors.

Textiles Texprocess Americas

texprocessam.link/98b
Early-bird registration is now open for Texprocess Americas, the largest sewn products and technology tradeshow in the Americas. Once again co-located with Techtextil North America, North America's only dedicated show for technical textiles and nonwovens, the event will bring together the entire supply chain for the textile industry. Discover new products, exciting technology, groundbreaking materials, and advanced solutions from hundreds of exhibitors from around the world, and access exclusive educational opportunities led by industry experts. Make your plans now to join the industry for three days of education, networking, and business development. Come and see for yourself, May 17–19, 2022, in Atlanta.

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