

CUSTOMER PROFILE —

AVANTE TEXTIL

Modernizing to stay competitive

Avante Textil is an exceptional case among Mexican apparel manufacturers. It operates one of the most advanced cotton-knit facilities in North America. It started as a spinning and knitting plant with dyeing and finishing capabilities, but has now expanded into sewing. The company operates two world-class quality control labs and uses the latest dyeing and stabilizing technologies. Its commitment to technology and quality is also evident in a new sewing facility for T-shirts and underwear. Fully-automated dye cutters, vacuum-operated backlatching on seams, and "no-hands" sleeve hemming are just some of the technologies employed in the cutting and sewing operations.

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DISTRIBUIDORA CONTINENTAL DE PANTALONES

Automating sewing operations

Distribuidora Continental de Pantalones (Continental) is focusing on technology to become more efficient. In low-wage countries such as Mexico, manufacturers often fail to modernize their sewing operations, which are the most labour-intensive part of garment production. *Continental* realized that this was a short-sighted policy and committed major resources to the acquisition of the Toyota Sewing System (TSS) and its related training packages.

The TSS requires greater operator skill and flexibility but results in much lower inventories and more consistent quality. The firm is now well-positioned to sell its dresses and casual pants to retailers requiring Quick Response (QR). Mr. Victor Vera, the owner of *Continental*, reports that his 350 employees now have reduced fatigue, less absenteeism, higher morale and operate more efficiently.

Interviews with industry observers in Mexico revealed that only a few of the largest firms are using the following technologies:

- computer automated manufacturing (CAM) and automated workstations;
- computerized cutters;
- programmable sewing machines, fusing and finishing equipment;
- warehouse automation;
- shop floor data collection;
- fabric testing; and
- manufacturing process-control systems.

Technologies that have been implemented on a broader scale include the following:

- **Computer automated design (CAD):** According to the *Cámara Nacional de la Industria del Vestido (CNIV)*, National Chamber of the Apparel Industry, there were more than 200 companies using CAD systems in 1993. About 40 percent use the Lectra system and the rest use the Gerber Accumark system. Industry observers say that the number of systems in use grew by an additional 40 percent in 1994.
- **Electronic data interchange (EDI) linkages with retailers:** As the retailing environment becomes more competitive, there is increased pressure on manufacturers to implement EDI to keep inventories at optimal levels in the stores. Larger chains such as *Aurrera* of the *Grupo Cifra* and *Sears de México* have been at the forefront in pushing for these changes. The Government of Mexico, the retailers association and the industry associations are all developing a national Quick Response (QR) program. Nonetheless, this technology is still in its infancy in Mexico.
- **Bar coding:** This is an essential step towards improved inventory management and implementation of QR and EDI. Until recently, the apparel classification process (SKU number) has traditionally been used only to identify style. Retailers are now requiring that goods be identified by style, size and colour.
- **Computerized management and accounting systems:** Many firms have personal computers (PCs) which are used for billing, bookkeeping and other administrative functions.