
Consumers “Take Comfort in Cotton”

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With the transformation of the United States from a postwar economy into a thriving, affluent industrial society in the early 1960's, U.S. consumer expectations broadened and expanded. “New and improved” were catchwords to describe new consumer interests, including clothing. A family of synthetic fibers, developed at this time, became popular with the public. For the next 20 years these synthetic fibers ruled clothing, a pretender to king cotton's throne.

How Cotton Became King

In the decade following the development of Eli Whitney's saw gin in 1791, cotton replaced wool and linen as the chief fiber for U.S. clothing and

forever changed textile production from a domestic chore to a highly profitable manufacturing industry.

By 1860 the United States was exporting nearly 1.2 billion pounds to England. In 1960 worldwide production of cotton had reached 25 billion pounds. In the United States, cotton accounted for 78 percent of all textile fibers sold at retail. There seemed to be no end in sight to the demand for cotton.

Synthetics and a Changing Consumer

After the close of World War II, synthetic fibers, primarily nylon and polyester, made steady gains in development and production. By



Following the development of Eli Whitney's saw gin in 1791, cotton became king of the textiles when it replaced wool and linen as the chief fiber for U.S. clothing. Cotton changed textile production from a domestic chore to a highly profitable manufacturing industry. (Soil Conservation Service)

1968 total worldwide production of nylon and polyester reached 3.2 billion and 2.5 billion pounds respectively. Production of cotton dropped to 22 billion pounds.

U.S. affluence and power had created a "push-button" consumer consciousness. Consumers demanded that their lives be made simpler and more carefree than they had been. All that remained for the synthetic fiber industry was to develop and market the right product.

In the High Plains of Texas, a coalition of growers began to detect that the old way of doing business had changed. Growing cotton fiber and delivering it to a selling point would no longer be sufficient to maintain profitability. Competition was rising in the form of a well-organized synthetic fiber industry exercising total control of its product from production through marketing. Without the variables of weather and pest control to consider, the synthetic fiber producer could manage supply and offer a product consistent in quality. Technology would even allow for specific fiber variants to be produced for individual end-products. Perhaps even more important, the synthetic fiber industry could offer technical and marketing support for its product from start to finish. U.S. cotton growers were dependent on third-party support—mills, manufacturers, and retailers—for marketing. If a textile mill required technical assistance in processing cotton, frequently the most accessible source for information was a regional synthetic fiber salesperson. The answer to most cotton production questions was simple—run uniform, strong synthetic fibers instead.

Growers realized that without a collective national marketing effort, consumer preference for their fiber would wane. Regional producer organizations called for a national effort. The ground-swell of popular

support was sufficient to petition Congress into developing and passing the Research and Promotion Act of 1966.

Cotton Incorporated

Cotton Incorporated, formed in 1971, is a USDA-approved organization consisting of certified producers. It contracted with the USDA-approved Cotton Board established in 1966 to promote cotton. In the 1970's, Cotton Incorporated faced a steadily declining market share, virtually no product at retail, a consumer increasingly enamored of easy-care products, and a textile industry that had just about abandoned the production of cotton goods. Cotton Incorporated began with a basic marketing philosophy, unique to the textile industry at that time, to "appeal directly to the consumers and satisfy their needs."

A focal point of promotion was needed—a symbol that could serve as the basis of all advertisements, produce an identity for the fiber, attract instant attention at retail, and in one glance communicate comfort, quality, and cotton.

Seal of Cotton

In 1973, after several years of development, the Seal of Cotton was introduced. Cotton Incorporated felt that public awareness of the seal would be a barometer of advertising and merchandising success, and so tracking of consumer identification of the seal began. After 1 year of commercial television advertising, a survey was made of the seal and 11 other corporate symbols, such as the CBS eye, Shell Oil, and the Wrigley arrow. All words were removed from the symbols, and respondents were asked to identify what each represented. When the results were proportionally calculated to represent the population of U.S. adults, about 18 percent were able to identify the Seal of Cotton.



From the beginning, Cotton Incorporated was committed to television advertising. Television was the only medium that could cost effectively reach millions of consumers instantly and allow for sight, sound, and motion. Cotton Incorporated chose to target women aged 18-49, a demographic segment that accounted for 70 percent of all textile purchases. To reach them, advertising was concentrated in morning news shows and daytime soap operas. The fiber company's message was simple, "The more cotton, the better."

Advertising would serve to raise consumer awareness, but it could not spur purchases or increase cotton's market share if no product existed. The synthetic fiber industry had achieved sweeping success by providing easy-care, no-iron apparel and home fabrics. It was the right characteristic at the right time. For cotton to compete, it would have to offer the same performance.

"Easy-Care" Cotton Challenge

Work to find a cotton-polyester blend had been underway for several years in USDA and Cotton Incorporated textile research laboratories, but the breakthrough happened at Cotton Incorporated's Raleigh, NC, Research Center. Blended fabrics of 60 percent cotton and 40 percent polyester offered the comfort of cotton with a sufficient easy-care performance consumers expected. The new fabric was named NATURAL BLEND® and,

backed by strong marketing approach, Springs Mills introduced the fabric in 1974.

Finally, a competitive product existed. NATURAL BLEND fabrics reached retail with the introduction of a cotton-rich product by Manhattan Shirt in 1975. But cotton's share of the textile market continued to decline to an all-time low of 34 percent. The momentum built by the powerful synthetic industry was fed by polyester producers each spending substantial dollars on advertising and promotion.

"Baby Boomers" and Cotton

Seemingly far removed from Seventh Avenue and the textile industry, however, the tide was turning. The same affluent postwar economy that had created a market for easy-care polyester also had created the single largest consumer demographic segment in history: the baby boomers. These youthful consumers created a demand for cotton that began to turn the tide. With this growing demand for cotton products, king cotton began to reemerge as a competitive force in U.S. clothing and fashion. Cotton was beginning to win back the share of market it had earlier lost to the "easy-care" synthetics.

Demand for cotton began to grow steadily, as did consumer awareness of cotton. For example, in one year alone, from 1975 to 1976, consumer recognition of the Seal of Cotton jumped from 35 percent to 46 percent. Meanwhile, NATURAL BLEND continued to grow in popularity. Montgomery Ward introduced a cotton-rich shirt in 1976, followed by Sears and J.C. Penney in 1977. Cannon introduced the first NATURAL BLEND sheet in 1977 and switched its "Royal Classic" towel line from blends to 100 percent cotton, as West Point Pepperell did with three towel lines, because of consumer demand.

Success Builds

Success began to build, and synthetic fiber manufacturers took notice. In an effort to capture cotton's single largest market and the only product area that had withstood polyester's intrusion, a synthetic fiber manufacturer contracted with a major mill and apparel manufacturer to produce a blended denim jean. Cotton Incorporated responded quickly with a major media campaign on television, in newspapers, and in magazines to tout the advantages of 100-percent cotton denim jeans. Retailers and manufacturers lent their support, and plans for a major blended denim jean evaporated.

With sufficient product now becoming available at retail, Cotton Incorporated adopted a competitive positioning in its advertising—"Once you get a feel for cotton, you won't feel like anything else"—to entice consumers back with the comfort of cotton. Success continued throughout 1979 and 1980 as Fieldcrest and Sears offered NATURAL BLEND sheets, and later J. P. Stevens began production of a 100-percent no-iron sheet, based on Cotton Incorporated technology.

By 1983, cotton could register sufficient gains. The fiber's share of the total textile market climbed 5 percentage points above 1975 levels to 39 percent. Recognition of the Cotton Seal soared to 63 percent. The program was working, and consumers were growing disenchanted with synthetics. To sustain growth, Cotton Incorporated needed to document this attitudinal shift.

Cotton Revolution

The fiber company contracted with the Home Testing Institute to conduct an in-home survey of 1,700 families. The respondents were asked to check their closets for textile products they no longer used, not

because of fashion or fit, but because of fabric-related failures. Overwhelmingly, consumers cited pilling, snagging, static electricity, yellowing, and inability of a fabric to breathe as reasons why they had discarded certain textile items. When this sampling was projected over the U.S. population, more than one billion textile products had been discarded because of fabric failures, primarily attributable to synthetic fibers.

The study prompted Cotton Incorporated to launch a major promotional campaign reeducating consumers on the definition of textile performance. The program, *True Performance*, centers on a retail identification program of hand-tags and labels. The system provides a convenient checklist of salient cotton characteristics at retail, making it easy for consumers to identify the natural fiber's advantages. The labels identify characteristics such as "breathable," "pill-free," "snag-free," "washable," "comfortable," and "static-free." Further studies found that the appearance of *True Performance* tags actually increased consumer buying intentions by 25 percent to 144 percent.

The program struck a responsive chord with the baby boom generation, which by 1984 had moved into a dominant position in the mainstream economy. Within 2 years, most major apparel manufacturers and retailers were participating actively in the program. Cotton's momentum, sparked by the introduction of NATURAL BLEND in 1974, was in full bloom.

In an effort to recapture the success that had come so easily in the early 1970's, the synthetic fiber industry banded together to form the Polyester Fashion Council. The Council's mission was to erase polyester's "tacky" image and reintroduce it as a "fashion" fiber. Top fashion designers were enlisted to produce high-end synthetic fiber fashions, and the

Council would later even petition the Federal Trade Commission to legally change the name "polyester." The request was denied for fear it would mislead consumers.

By 1986 cotton was once again in a dominant position. The fiber's share of the total textile market reached 44 percent. In apparel, cotton held a 43 percent share and in home fabrics, a 50 percent share. Cotton Seal recognition among U.S. adults climbed to 71 percent.

In less than 20 years, Cotton Incorporated accomplished what once seemed improbable. Through a coordinated system of research, marketing, merchandising, advertising, and promotions, cotton, once pegged as a warm weather fiber, was being sold for fall and winter. Denim jeans were transformed from utilitarian apparel into a fashion item. Ground was broken in categories such as non-wovens (personal hygiene products, mattress pads, etc.) and decorative products such as cotton window coverings, upholstery fabrics, and wall coverings.

It was apparent that consumers had come back to cotton. Cotton Incorporated mobilized to strengthen that position and ensure that consumers not only like cotton, but love it. Close tracking of the baby boomers was maintained throughout the 1980's, and as these consumers moved further into adulthood and started families, testing revealed attitudinal changes, especially in cotton's target audience of women aged 18-49.

Take Comfort in Cotton

With the multiple role demands of wife, mother, and employee, women were feeling the strains of their responsibility. Focus groups highlighted how women sought the "one quiet moment of the day" where they could pamper themselves. Overwhelmingly, these quiet moments

involved cotton textiles—plush towels, cotton bathrobes, a favorite quilt, or comforting jeans and T-shirts.

Recognizing that a "New American Family" was evolving, Cotton Incorporated developed a new advertising campaign to mirror these strong feelings toward cotton. The campaign, dubbed "take comfort in cotton," reached national airwaves in 1987 by advertising on morning news shows, daytime television, and late night programs. Identification with its message brought consumers to a new level of preference for cotton.

New Cotton Sales

As 1987 came to a close, Cotton Incorporated realized its most successful year. Market share climbed to 49 percent, seal awareness held fast at 71 percent, and mill consumption of U.S. cotton hit levels not seen in 15 years. In its 17 years of operation, Cotton Incorporated generated more than \$14 billion dollars of new cotton sales for the Nation's cotton growers on an investment of less than \$300 million dollars. The natural fiber had reestablished itself as the primary fiber for domestic textile production.

Future Looks Promising

Heading into the 1990's, the future is promising. A new generation of teenagers is growing up in all-cotton jeans, cotton-rich fleece, knits, sheets, and towels. As fashion trends come in vogue, as textile developments reach fruition, and as demographic shifts influence the market, Cotton Incorporated will continue to change and adapt. Always stressing cotton's comfort and performance, Cotton Incorporated will base future marketing on the same sound principle it began with: Above all else, respond to the consumer, provide products to meet demand, and institute the programs that will foster the most profitable return to the Nation's cotton growers.