
MAS FABRICS - Leading innovation in the apparel supply chain for Sri Lanka

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The story of MAS Fabrics and its efforts to present Sri Lanka as the preferred apparel sourcing destination to the world. When Timothy Speldewinde, CEO - Stretchline Holdings, says that his company manufactures 1.5 million metres of elastic a day, he is not stretching the truth. "That means we make enough elastic each year to wrap around the world 10 times over - and that's without stretching it," he says. This is just another feat at MAS Fabrics and one more chapter in the MAS Holdings success story.

According to Speldewinde, who is also the Managing Director of MAS Fabrics and a Member of the Board of MAS Holdings, the Fabrics story began with Stretchline Holdings, when MAS Holdings decided to venture into raw materials as a supply chain to its burgeoning business of lingerie and hosiery. In 1996, Deshamanya Mahesh Amalean, Chairman - MAS Holdings, signed up in a three-way joint venture with world-renowned Charnwood Elastics - UK and MAST Industries - US. At the time, Charnwood Elastics was considered the world's largest supplier of elastics for underwear products. In 2001, Stretchline became a global brand and Charnwood elastics changed its name to Stretchline UK, and MAST Industries sold its shares to Brandot International owned by Martin Trust. Headquartered in Hong Kong, Stretchline Holdings is one of the world's leading manufacturers of elastics today. The company is known for its innovative design and product-development capabilities and supplies woven, knitted, jacquard and printed elastics to some of the leading global brands and retailers. The Stretchline Group of Companies has manufacturing facilities in the UK, the US, Mexico, Indonesia, Chi-na and Sri Lanka, with a global workforce of over 4,000 people. "The success of Stretchline led to many other achievements," says Speldewinde. Being the first company within the group to venture over-seas, Stretchline is a truly global brand today, of-fering a unified product with global supply and a colour-management system together with ded-icated customer-management teams. "All this was achieved within 10 short years, when we went from being a US\$ 3 million company to a US\$ 80 million business," Speldewinde says. The company's strategy was to team up with great partners in intimates. "We now regard the Sri Lankan operation as the hub, where we offer customers one global product," Speldewinde explains. "We offer solutions that are closest to the needle point. We follow the Coca-Cola strategy," he reveals. To add to existing synergies, MAS Holdings set up a 'Fabric Cluster', teaming up with world-renowned lace manufacturer Noyon Dentelles, Calais, Prym Intimates Group, Textprint S.A. and Dogi International Fabrics (Dogi) - Spain, as well as Elastic Fabrics of America (EFA) -US. With little persuasion, all of these partners agreed to set up facilities in Sri Lanka run by Sri Lankan CEOs and backed by a team of technicians from the parent company. Speldewinde adds that all these facilities were set up locally because of the availability of skills and training. "We have phenomenal talent and that makes us the leader in innovation," he says. Even within MAS Holdings, Stretchline is considered the No. 1 innovator. Consolidating its excellence in performance is the recent feat at the 'Femmy Awards 2008'. The Femmy Awards honour those individuals and companies that have significantly contributed to the intimate-apparel industry and its growth in the US. The event is recognised as one of the premier events in the intimate-apparel industry. Run by the Underfashion Club, with the entirety of the intimate-apparel industry represented in the membership of this organisation, Stretchline was awarded the 'Innovation Award 2008'. "This is the first time ever in its 50-year histo-ry that a company outside the US has won this award," discloses Speldewinde. "This is a major achievement for us and has proven that our skills are phenomenal," he adds. Naturally, this recognition has brought Stretchline extensive inquiries, even as they continue to grow within the industry. Speldewinde is especially proud of his Research & Innovation (R&I) team. Headed by Krishan Weerawansa, this team has the creative power to turn simple tasks into superlative achievements. In 2003, Stretchline UK was encouraged to relocate its Research & Innovation Centre from the UK, to Biyagama - solely for cost-effective purposes. It was undoubtedly a move that Stretchline has thrived on ever since. "We have now become the leading innovator in narrow-performance products worldwide," Speldewinde says. He explains that narrow-performance products range from 2mm to 155mm. The Research & Innovation Centre has 160 qualified employees working seven days a week on 54 machines and is by far the largest team in product development in the region. This dedicated Research & Innovation Centre provides a strong focus on product innovation and design, working closely with re-tailers, designers and vendors at every step from concept through to production. Considered a 'wonder boy' at Stretchline and amongst its partners, Weerawansa has a mind that works and thinks outside the box. In fact, Speldewinde ruefully admits that Weerawansa is privy to more of Victoria's Secrets than Mahesh Amalean or himself. The R&I team has modified machines "so remarkably that our production is at unbelievable levels", claims Speldewinde. According to him, the 35 million metres of elastic Sri Lanka produces monthly is fabricated on 160 machines, whereas any other company would need 360 machines to accomplish the same task. He adds that the Locksafe machines used at Stretchline are "all standard machines that have been expertly modified by our R&I team". But Weerawansa is not unduly fazed by his reputation. For him, it is the "30 components which make the bra the most complex piece of cloth-ing" that gives him more challenges than he ev-er thought was possible. "And wherever there is a challenge, there is an opportunity," he says. Weerawansa started off in production and moved on to planning, HR and operations. Recognising his creative talents, Speldewinde sent him for a two-year degree to the University of Derby -UK, where he quickly grasped the concepts of the entire textile manufacturing process, studied the complexities of lingerie and followed the fashion trends of the industry. Weerawansa admits that he is also a keen observer of the latest developments in microelectronics, technology and smart fabrics, which he will try to incorpo-rate into his innovations. That would be the ultimate 'wonder bra'. Striving for greater achievements and challenges, Weerawansa and his resourceful team work round the clock preparing products for sea-sonal ranges by Victoria's Secret and Marks & Spencer, their most demanding customers. "These are customers who demand newness and innovation constantly and continuously," the R&I team reveals. Some of its innovation lies in patented products such as the Fortitube bra-wire casing, Locksafe and new developments such as Bondelast, Eco-lastic

and Stay4Sure. Fortitube, with a 20-year worldwide patent, is a casing used for the under-wire of a bra to prevent it from dislodging. Lock-safe, also patented, prevents the unravelling of elastics and is used on all Marks & Spencer, Tesco, Bhs and Victoria's Secret products. Bondelast is a special elastic made using bondable adhesive and is now used by Speedo for its 'LZR Racer' swimwear collection for the Beijing Olympics. "In fact, 14 world records have been broken by swimmers wearing Bondelast swimwear," Speldewinde reveals. Stay4Sure is a silicon technology used for strapless bras and hosiery. This patented product was donated to the British Cycling Team for the Beijing Olympics. The CEO of Stretchline Sri Lanka, Natasha Bo-ralessa Kumara, says that MAS Fabrics complements MAS Intimates and MAS Active in providing an integrated supply-chain solution. MAS Fabrics is made up of six highly specialised facilities that make virtual verticality a physical reality on the island. Collaborative innovation and speed to market are two of the main strategies pursued by MAS Fabrics to further strengthen Sri Lanka as the preferred manufacturer of high-quality intimate and active apparel. "The team at Stretchline Sri Lanka has a huge appetite to learn and embrace any new technology with ease" says Natasha. "This eagerness to adopt new technology, together with a never-say-die attitude, helps us to continuously add value to our customers through innovative product and delivery solutions," she elaborates. Stretchline Sri Lanka's customer portfolio includes some of the world's leading brands such as Victoria's Secret Stores, Marks & Spencer, Gap, Nike, adidas, Speedo, Jockey, Intimissimi, Bhs, Next, LBI, Triumph and Diesel. The product portfolio includes woven, jacquard and cro-chet elastic, processed through in-house printing and dyeing facilities. These facilities follow a "clean production methodology" and are also ISO 14001 and Oeko-Tex certified, which is the industry benchmark for global testing of harmful substances contained in consumer textiles. Natasha adds that stringent controls have been incorporated into all processes to generate less waste and consume less resources, such as electricity and water. In keeping with BOI requirements, the facility has its own effluent treatment plant, where all waste is treated prior to being discharged into the zone treatment plant. Stretchline Sri Lanka employs over 1,300 associates of whom 90 per cent are male. All associates are continuously trained by the company's in-house training department to develop their fullest potential. Stretchline is proud of the fact that the core teams which set up plants in China, Indonesia and Mexico comprised Sri Lankans and that, to date, most overseas technical roles are performed by Sri Lankan expatriates. The bra, considered the most complex item of common apparel known, is made up of accessories that require precision and accuracy. Prym Intimates Lanka was set up in March 2002 as a joint venture between Prym Intimates Group PLC, a 400-year old German family business, and Stretchline Holdings, to cater to such components. Since its inception, Prym Intimates has always been highly focused on providing innovative solutions to design issues, having already pioneered a patent product - the Soft-Seal hook and eye. In addition, Prym has a strong record of innovating new products and solutions which improve comfort and durability, such as the ultrasonically sealed shoulder straps, hook and eye tape, Soft-Seal and PET-coated metal underwire. Niranjana Wijesekera, Managing Director/CEO of Prym Intimates Sri Lanka, says that the company "makes all the little things that make all the difference". With three manufacturing facilities in Malaysia, China and Sri Lanka, dedicated sales offices are situated in the UK, the US and Hong Kong. The patented Soft-Seal is the most superior and technically advanced hook-and-eye tape in the market. The unique sealed inverted edges and microfibre feel guarantee an ultra-soft touch to the skin, thus enhancing 'never-before achieved comfort' for the wearer. Prym is also the exclusive manufacturer and distributor for this patented product in Asia. "This has become the industry standard providing the ultimate in comfort," Wijesekera says. Based on that success, Prym Intimates moved on to sports bras, incorporating moisture management straps and the foam/gel-inserted hook and eye, with an emphasis on comfort and performance. Wijesekera explains that Prym's machine-intensive plant is staffed by 300 employees and has a monthly production capacity of over five million hooks and eyes, which are supplied to all key international lingerie brands. Complementary to this core product, Prym Intimates Lanka also has established capacity to manufacture over eight million galvanised and PET-coated underwires, two million made-up elastic shoulder-straps and corresponding requirements of rings and slides, which comfortably covers the island's requirements in terms of these bra trims. The most important customers remain leading retailers out of US and European markets, which inspire Prym to continually innovate and improve performance of the cutting-edge products being manufactured. Further expansion is also planned for, in order to meet growing demand stemming from Indian lingerie manufacturers. "Our biggest challenge is to find different innovative aspects to this component," says Wijesekera. "Because what you can't see is what makes all the difference in the bra," he adds. The beauty of the bra is in its visual element and lace is a fanciful addition in that aspect. For nearly a century, Noyon lace has been renowned for these qualities among lingerie manufacturers the world over. As a leader in lace, Noyon continuously researches developments in fashion and technology to keep abreast of new design trends. In 2004, MAS Fabrics - in a joint venture with Noyon Dentelles, Calais - set up Noyon Lanka to offer high-quality lace out of Sri Lanka, thereby taking advantage of manufacturing in Asia as well as logistical and service advantages of 'being close to the needle point'. Noyon Lanka's technical capabilities include the entire process from warping, knitting, clipping, shaving, dyeing, finishing, inspection and QA testing to scalloping. Manufacturing Jacquardtronic and Textronic lace, the current annual production capacity of Noyon Lanka is approximately 11 million metres of galloon lace. According to the CEO of Noyon Lanka, Murad Rajudin: "When GSP Plus was introduced in 2005, we saw a lot of business coming into Sri Lanka." Such advantages, backed by the Noyon Lanka team's ability and enthusiasm to learn the intricacies of lace making - as well as a global network of sales offices and agents located in the US, the UK, Italy, Hong Kong, Spain, Germany, Taiwan and India - enabled Noyon Lanka to grow its business rapidly. Customers are assured of prompt and efficient sales services worldwide. Noyon Lanka offers a high degree of flexibility in management of order volumes as well as pricing and lead times, thanks to close collaboration with the manufacturing unit in France. With nearly 100 years of experience of being at the forefront of lace design, leading lingerie brands have accepted Noyon as a leader in lace. Noyon launches over 600 designs a year, closely complementing the latest seasonal trends. Noyon also offers a design service, which works closely with customers to help them select the best design, colour and type of lace for their product. Rajudin says that after the initial training provided by technicians from Calais, in a relatively

short period of time, his team of 320 employees have studied the skills and knowledge of lace making and independently work the 36 looms as well as the dyeing and finishing processes. Today, Noyon Lanka has an impressive customer portfolio including Intimissimi, Marks & Spencer, Victoria's Secret, Chantelle Group, La Senza, Calvin Klein, Banana Republic and Play-tex. Whilst Noyon is considered the leader in design, such designs are primarily influenced by European tastes. Noyon Lanka realised that Asian influences can also play an important part in world fashion. Therefore, collaborating with Indian textile designers, Noyon Lanka initiated an Asian-influenced range within the Noyon collection, titled the Jaali range. This range has been showcased at four fairs in Paris and Lyon since January 2006. Each season depicts a different theme, where inspiration is drawn from a particular region, culture or craft in Sri Lanka and India. The themes showcased to date drew inspiration from Jaipur, Benares, Sigiriya (aptly titled 'Apsara'), Peradeniya Botanical Gardens and the carpet-weaving craft. "This will possibly set a trend with an Asian touch to this popular French product," says Rajudin. Noyon Lanka has also introduced Cupron, a copper-based yarn, into selected lace designs. Cupron permanently binds its proprietary copper compound to textile fibres and offers anti-microbial protection against micro-organisms, as well as other health benefits. Another area that Noyon Lanka is working on is the application of special finishes such as aloe vera to selected laces. Noyon Lanka also collaborates with other companies within MAS Fabrics and MAS Holdings to provide lace based on common themes, as well as value-added products such as laminated moulded lace cups. The last, but certainly not least, component of the supply chain is the body fabric. In 2007, this link in the supply chain was formalised with a joint-venture partnership with Dogi International Fabrics (Dogi) - Spain and Elastic Fabrics of America (EFA) - US. Headed by CEO Dhananjaya Rajapaksha, DOGIEFA is built on the synergistic strengths of its two operational partners, which subsequently merged to become divisions of the Dogi International Fabrics Group, known for its innovation and manufacturing acumen. This high-quality warp-knit operation is the first of its kind in the South Asian region, and has the experience and knowledge of the global supply chain that DOGIEFA brings vis-a-vis international expertise in key market segments - including intimate apparel, swimwear, active wear and sportswear among others. More importantly, DOGIEFA will result in decreased lead times for apparel manufacturers and will provide greater flexibility in choosing fabric suppliers. DOGIEFA is geared to produce a range of stretch products including Tricot, Raschel, Satin, Powernet, Techsheen, Lockstitch, Mesh, Ribs, Novelty and many more. Since opening in 2007, the facility produces 2.5 million metres per year and is forecasted to expand to 7.5 million metres per year by 2010. Rajapaksha says that DOGIEFA offers a wide range of warp-knit fabrics to its customer base by focusing on both collaborative and open-line developments that utilise the latest technology while incorporating trends that reflect the strategic mission of its key accounts. A highly trained and technically adept team of 130 employees operate 21 warp-knitting machines. This flattened technology is the only one of its kind in fabrics that have a two-way stretch. "It is a highly sensitive operation that requires accuracy in human resources, and perfect temperature and humidity controls," he says. DOGIEFA is now a fully vertical operation providing the complete process from warping, knitting and dyeing to the finished fabric. To add more colour to this product, in July 2007, MAS Holdings signed up with Texprint S.A., to establish a fabric printing facility in Sri Lanka. The alliance between these industry leaders was to cater to the fast-growing global intimate, swimwear, active and sportswear segments, by supplying them with high-quality fabric printing solutions. High-quality fabric printing requires the creation of print designs in line with the latest fashion trends and specific skills in handling high-value fabrics, and this state-of-the-art fabric printing facility was to cover both conventional and digital printing capabilities for synthetics, viscose, cotton and other fabrics used in the identified market segments. This will fill the current gap for synthetic fabric printing in the island and is set to open up new business opportunities in the region's high-value fashion-driven apparel business, especially in swimwear. The country's 2007 'Young CIMA Star Award' winner, Asanka Wimalaratna, was handpicked to head Textprint Lanka, which is located in the MAS Fabrics Park (MFP) - Thulhiriya. "We offer customers the unique advantage of sourcing solid and printed fabrics from a single location with a significant cost and time saving," says Wimalaratna. Using the most advanced technology in printing - including flat-bed, rotary, rotating table and digital printing - Textprint, with special focus on research and innovation, is establishing itself as a modern and competitive printer within the region. "Our role starts at the point at which the customer hands over an artwork or a design concept," Wimalaratna says. Textprint hopes to partner with world-renowned design houses in the US and Europe, famous for their dedicated design creations in swimwear and lingerie - as well as with worldwide customers such as Triumph, Simone Perele, Victoria's Secret, Lands' End, Vanity Fair, Chantelle and Calzedonia - and will offer design expertise to customers manufacturing out of Sri Lanka. "Whilst our main focus is on swimwear and lingerie products, our target customers are Victoria's Secret, Lands' End, Speedo, Triumph and Marks & Spencer," he adds. Wimalaratna says that the initial capacity of 100,000 metres per month is expected to rise to 300,000 metres per month by 2009/10. "We provide a unique solution for Sri Lanka, where all the print technologies come under one roof," he says. His staff capacity of 50 employees handles the entire vertical manufacturing process from CAD/CAM design and development, screen engraving, printing and finishing to fabric inspection and testing. The MAS Fabrics story is woven together within these six facilities and is very much a part of one of the most complex undergarments used. The expertise, innovation, accuracy and attention given to the bra can only be appreciated in the hard work and dedication put in by the 2,500 employees at MAS Fabrics. "We club together for sales and marketing and for presenting Sri Lanka as the preferred underwear manufacturer," Speldewinde says. In fact, their innovative marketing gimmick comes in ONE BOX - Made In Sri Lanka, offering the gamut of accessories: elastics, lace, warp-knit fabrics, moulded cups and printed fabrics. "You can see that we are no longer an elastic company," says Speldewinde. And he concludes: "We have achieved this status because we work hard and play hard!" - Mihiri Wikramanayake (Courtesy : LMD - The Voice of Business - May 2008)