

## Innovation is part of the fabric at Montreal Woollens

By Rose Simone, Record staff

December 22, 2010

CAMBRIDGE — Through most of the 20th century, thousands of Cambridge residents worked in the textile industry, doing everything from unwinding raw silk skeins from the Orient to making polyester.

But starting in the 1970s the industrial fabric began to fray. Companies such as Dobbie Industries (later Newlands), Riverside Yarns, and Dominion Woollens and Worsteds vanished from the landscape. Even the iconic Tiger Brand factory closed in 2005.

So people might be surprised to walk into Montreal Woollens Canada Ltd. and discover there is still a thriving fabric manufacturer in Cambridge, one that has found a niche in brand new markets.

Montreal Woollens employs about 75 people, mainly in the production of materials that go into blinds and window coverings.

When you visit retailers such as Sears, Home Depot, Lowe's and Blinds to Go and flip through the fabric sample books for window covering brands such as Hunter Douglas, Levolor and Graber, you are looking at materials made at Montreal Woollens.

In addition to making fabrics for blind manufacturers, the Elgin Street North company makes specialty fabrics, such as anti-microbial fabrics used in the health-care sector.

"We have a broad range of equipment here, so there is a lot that we can do that others cannot," says Robert Berger, who runs Montreal Woollens. The business was started in Montreal by his late father and grandfather in 1963. It moved to Cambridge in 1976 after the Bergers took over the former Fromm Bros. textile business.

Today, all of the company's manufacturing is done in Cambridge, with the exception of filter media materials for waste water treatment, which are produced in a plant in the United States.

Montreal Woollens originally produced apparel fabrics, but with the influx of clothing from offshore manufacturers, it was forced to evolve. "You have to go with the flow," says Berger. "You have to look at what makes you competitive."

It has evolved so much, Berger doesn't like to use the word "textiles" to describe the company's products. They are "engineered materials" with a wide range of properties, he says.



**Rec-woollens enterprise-21.** Bob Berger says Montreal Woollens will prosper as long as it uses innovation to stay ahead of the competition. Philip Walker/Record staff Source: Record staff

"It is a design business and it is a very intricate business because nothing we do is off the shelf," he says. The company's designers come up with hundreds of new designs every year. Raw materials are dyed and go through as many as 18 different processes, including warping, weaving, knitting, coating, printing, lamination, pleating and slitting, all using computerized machinery.

The company is involved in research and development with universities that are developing new solar materials. "We would love every window covering to be a solar panel," Berger says. Research also is being done into reflective and insulating materials, and materials with totally new properties that are created using nanotechnology techniques.

"We have a full-time research and development person on site who does research into new materials and is a liaison with universities," Berger says.

Staying ahead of the technology curve is the only way to survive against low cost competitors in Asia, Berger says.

This is why Montreal Woollens encourages staff education and training. The company, which has won national and local awards for workforce training and development, has an education room with a bank of computers that employees, who come from all over the world, can use to upgrade their education and skills.

Employees go through a skills assessment and get individualized programs that can be done over the web. They do everything from upgrading literacy and getting their high school equivalency papers, to post-secondary degrees.

The training helps the employees and the company, Berger says. "It is part of our cost of doing business, because it is part of our future."

The recent recession highlighted how important it is to be able to adapt, he says. About 70 per cent of the company's business is done in the United States, where many people were losing their homes. From the middle of 2008 to the spring of 2009, business was tough. "All of customers were affected," Berger says. "They were all reducing staff and closing plants and some went out of business entirely."

Montreal Woollens laid off employees or reduced work weeks to three and half days. "But we told our employees the education room was open and this was the time, more than ever, to accelerate their skills," Berger says.

The business did come back over the past year. "We were lucky that we didn't have a lot of debt and we were not over-leveraged," Berger says. But with the U.S. economy still struggling, "the next couple years will really be about avoiding mistakes," he says.

Berger says Montreal Woollens has navigated choppy waters for 48 years by adapting to change. He expects it will be here in the future, "as long as we can stay ahead of the competition by being smart, by being innovative and always thinking."

[rsimone@therecord.com](mailto:rsimone@therecord.com)