



Coventry business regrows with aid

Concordia Fibers finds the switch from fabrics to biomedical products a profitable one. "We're doing a lot better," says its company president

By Benjamin N. Gedan
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Concordia Fibers is tripling its manufacturing space dedicated to biomedical products at its Coventry complex, speeding the transition from synthetic fabrics for textile mills to materials that can be implanted in the human body.

The privately held company said yesterday that it will use \$1.5 million in new investments to pay for the expansion.

That includes \$250,000 from the Slater Technology Fund, a taxpayer-backed source of venture capital.

"Our medical business is growing and this gives us an opportunity to rapidly expand," Randal W. Spencer, Concordia's president and chief executive officer, said in an interview. "It's a very exciting time for us."

Slater typically supports start-up companies. But it has been strongly backing Concordia, founded in 1920, as it transforms its business model to overcome competition from low-cost Asian imports.

In all, the Slater Fund has invested \$500,000 in Concordia, beginning with \$100,000 in 2003.

Two years later, the fund donated an additional \$150,000, before approving the newest \$250,000 investment this summer. (Concordia has not disclosed the source of the other \$1.25 million it recently received, saying only that it was provided by "friends and family.")

"Concordia's transformation from a traditional textile manufacturer to a developer and supplier of novel biomedical products is an excellent example of the innovation and entrepreneurship we are witnessing in the life sciences sector here in Rhode Island," Richard G. Horan, the Slater Fund's senior managing director, said in a statement yesterday.

Concordia's 60 employees work in an 80,000-square-foot facility, with 3,000 square feet reserved for producing medical technology.

Competition from China has contributed to the dismantling of many of the region's textile companies. Earlier this month, the once dominant Quaker Fabric Corp., in Fall River, a longtime Concordia customer, declared bankruptcy.

More than 900 people, including at least 62 Rhode Island residents, lost their jobs. "We're fighting that trend tooth and nail," Spencer said. "It just speaks to how far out of the box you have to step today in manufacturing in order to survive."

To compensate for lost revenues in its traditional yarns and fabrics, Concordia has been focusing on complex products it hopes are less vulnerable to the factories in Asia.

Two years ago, Concordia acquired the Albany International Research Co.'s biomedical product line, including equipment and the processes for making so-called bioabsorbable material.

Operating out of a "clean room" in its Coventry plant, Concordia manufactures sterile material that can provide a surface for cellular regeneration. The material, including the BIOFELT brand, disintegrates after tissue has regrown.

Concordia does not publish its annual revenue. But in an interview, Spencer said sales of its new products were increasing. Products designed since 2004, he said, now generate half of the company's revenue.

"We're doing a lot better," Spencer said.

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