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TECH INNOVATION EXPANDS AT A HEALTHY PACE 2005 Brings Many New Market-Focused Software Solutions

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As software providers close the books on a positive year, the promise of an even better 2005 appears to be accelerating the pace of new software development for the global apparel/textile industry.

As the industry continues at a rapid pace of change, both new and established software developers are poised to launch a wide range of new products aimed at addressing key industry drivers such as time to market, product innovation, supply chain complexity, intensely competitive pricing, and other critical challenges and opportunities.

Following are a few of the interesting trends taking place in key software product categories for 2005.

Design Collaboration

In many segments, consumers have expressed their preference for greater choice at retail. While encouraging creativity and expanding design collaboration can increase product innovation, it can also add time and complexity to bringing new products to market. At this largely unstructured stage, many see available design (CAD) and product development (PDM, PLM) solutions as too complex and cumbersome to help manage global collaboration around initial product concepts. Coming soon are simpler, web-based tools targeted specifically at solving the time and accessibility issues that are critical to enhancing collaboration on styling, fabrication, etc. at this initial stage of the product lifecycle.

Product Lifecycle Management

With so much focus on time to market, it is easy to understand why the number of software solutions offered in this space continues to grow. This already hot market will soon become more crowded as market leaders expand their capabilities and several new companies enter the fray. Some traditional ERP companies are already promoting new developments that are designed to engage their products further upstream into pre-production processes. Others will surely follow.

Look for expanded use of web technologies in this space, as well as more sophisticated event tracking and process management capabilities such as color approval management. Newcomers in this space will be advertising simplicity and practicality as they target small and mid-market companies.

Enterprise Solutions

Established enterprise solution (ERP) providers have been hard at work increasing their relevance and footprint as the industry evolves. As noted earlier, many have added pre-production functionality. Of greater significance, we will continue to see added focus on efficient sourcing and supplier (vendor) management. With full package sourcing at center stage, enterprise providers are positioning to manage the complexity of both the supply and distribution networks. Of specific interest are software tools designed to better leverage the expanded set of data collected as RFID technologies are adopted across the supply chain.

We will continue to see new and interesting entries in the enterprise space, most notably targeted at small to mid-market companies. Look for these new players to bring innovation in both web capabilities as well as integrated packages that address the specific needs of retailers, brands, and full package producers.

Manufacturing Technology

With the shift to full-package sourcing, the technology needs of apparel producers have changed dramatically over recent years. Producers are increasingly vested in all aspects of the product lifecycle, from product development to vendor managed inventory. Technologies that help producers collaborate with and provide visibility for their customers are becoming essential to their continued success. As noted above, we expect to see several new mid-market solutions focused on meeting the specific needs of package producers.

Given the global availability of low labor costs, package providers now recognize that fabric costs can represent 50% or more of today's overall manufacturing cost. New technology will soon be available to help both the producer and the sourcing executive more quickly and accurately estimate the actual production cost of fabrics in the bidding stage. Software tools are also now available to advise producers in the procurement and selection of fabric for cutting, also helping to better optimize overall product cost.

With these and many more innovations in the works, 2005 is shaping up to be an important year for both technology providers and buyers. Technology Solutions 2005 serves as the perfect venue to learn more about how these exciting new products can strengthen your business for the future.

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