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GARMENTS/APPAREL, SPORTING GOODS & TOYS - Plus-size importer gaining from customs broker visits By Paul Scott Abbott, *AJOT*

The plus-size women's fashions imported by Ulla Popken seldom are hindered by Customs officials, thanks in large part to the hands-on approach of the firm's longtime logistics and customs brokerage firm.

Compliance specialists from Baltimore-based Samuel Shapiro & Co. Inc. regularly make the 40-minute trek to Ulla Popken's suburban headquarters – in a former fighter jet factory building – and pre-classify items by garment category. Doing so greatly reduces chances of Customs-related delays.

"It's a nice, proactive approach, and it sets a good example for other importers," said Jane L. Taeger, Director of Compliance at Shapiro. "It certainly helps avoid a holdup of goods at the airport or the pier."

Alicia McGuire, merchandise manager at Ulla Popken, said such pre-classification is particularly important at a time when textiles and garments are under heavy scrutiny by US Customs & Border Protection officials.

"Ever since 9/11, it's been intense on what they do," said McGuire, citing Customs' careful eyeing of origin of products, thread counts, whether an item is knitted or woven, and other factors that come into play in determining import duties.

With textiles accounting for 43% of all duties collected by CBP, the federal agency has targeted the textile and wearing apparel sector as a priority trade issue. Shapiro's Taeger noted that importers face such challenges as those associated with quotas, transshipment, proof of origin, intellectual property rights and multiple free-trade agreements.

The philosophy held by those at Ulla Popken and the Shapiro firm espouses heading off such concerns before they become an issue.

When plans are made at Ulla Popken to import a particular garment, photographs of the item are shared with Shapiro compliance specialists. Then, as soon as samples are available at the fashion firm's offices, the Shapiro specialists come over to give them a hands-on examination. The visits typically occur at least once during each of the four fashion seasons.

Each year, some 600 items – from skirts and sweaters to bathing suits and brassieres to coats and jackets – are classified at Ulla Popken, according to McGuire.

The 345,000-square-foot facility to which the compliance specialists come, located in Glen Arm in Baltimore County, used to be a Northrop Grumman fighter jet plant. It now houses Ulla Popken's distribution center, buying department, art department, creative department, photo studio. It serves other functions as well, employing 50 people.

Among the tasks assumed by Shapiro is arrangement of trucking to bring goods to the distribution center from seaport and airport facilities.

In many cases, ocean imports come into the Port of Baltimore, including as part of the Shapiro firm's weekly consolidation of less-than-containerload cargoes direct from Hong Kong. Sometimes, imports from India enter the United States via New York, while containers from China may come in through the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, and then be railed across country to Maryland.

McGuire said her firm imports between 24 and 30 forty-foot containerloads a year by ocean, and brings in at least 70 air shipments annually. Almost all the air shipments arrive at nearby Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport.

About 35% of Ulla Popken garments come from manufacturers in China, with Turkey and India each accounting for 30%, according to McGuire. The remaining five percent of items are produced in other overseas locations.

The private firm traces its roots to the Popken family textile operation that began in Hamlin, Germany, in 1880. The company continues to operate retail stores in Europe and elsewhere, while its US sales volume is evenly split between online and catalog sales, according to McGuire, who joined the firm 13 years ago as a salesperson at a now-shuttered Ulla Popken store in Towson Mall.

True to its German origin, the firm utilizes DHL for virtually all its shipments to customers.

McGuire said she believes other apparel importers could benefit from the hands-on approach taken at Ulla Popken, which includes frequent face-to-face meetings at manufacturers' facilities, in addition to the Customs Broker visits.

McGuire offers two-pronged advice to others: "Make sure your vendors are doing their job, and make sure you have a good Customs Broker."

The Shapiro firm, founded in Baltimore in 1915, has a tradition of maintaining close ties throughout the trade community and takes a lead role in promoting awareness of compliance issues. For example, Shapiro hosted a half-day "Focus on Textiles" seminar on Aug. 9, immediately preceding the Propeller Club of the United States Port of Baltimore Chapter's annual crab feast.