

ENTERING THE LIMELIGHT

A long-established SKILCRAFT® product is leading NIB associated agency Alphapointe into the commercial marketplace on a national level.

BY ANDY BROWNSTEIN



▲ Pauline Doling sews mesh pockets for Speedy Scrubbers. She found a career and more at Alphapointe in Brooklyn, New York.



▲ Tomas Lopez inserts sponges into mesh pockets as part of the Speedy Scrubber production team.



▲ Anthony Jording provides the finishing touches and prepares Speedy Scrubbers for packaging.

Alphapointe in New York City has manufactured the Speedy Scrubber, a simple kitchen sponge designed for military commissaries, for more than 25 years. It's the number one seller for the National Industries for the Blind (NIB) associated agency, selling as many as 100,000 units a year, and a product so popular that Brenda Mee, Alphapointe's director of business development, said it's not uncommon for "folks, including retired colonels, to call us if their commissary is out of stock."

Given its devoted customers in the federal marketplace, Speedy Scrubber was a natural product to turn to when NIB forged a new partnership with Walmart. In May, the retail giant began selling SKILCRAFT® Speedy Scrubbers at 114 stores, mostly in the northeast. The partnership is a milestone for NIB – while some of its 95 associated agencies have partnered with retailers in local markets, this is the first time NIB has aligned with

a retailer of Walmart's size to provide products for a national market.

"The unemployment rate for people who are blind is 70 percent nationally," said Reinhard Mabry, president and CEO of Alphapointe. "Although many hiring professionals view people who are blind as difficult to employ, we are demonstrating that people who are blind are extraordinarily capable and talented when given the opportunity. And we're demonstrating that by delivering performance, quality and timely delivery to the largest retailer in the world. If we can do it for Walmart, that sets an example for other employers about what people who are blind can do."

The partnership began in July of 2014 as part of Walmart's U.S. Manufacturing Initiative. The retailer, which envisions a national effort by companies, industry leaders, lawmakers and

others to jump-start U.S. manufacturing and rebuild the middle class, has pledged to do its part by spending \$250 billion by 2023 on products supporting the creation of American jobs. Representatives of hundreds of organizations descended on Walmart's Bentonville, Arkansas, headquarters for an open-call event that Russell Shaffer, a senior manager of corporate affairs at Walmart, describes as "a Shark Tank-style pitch presentation."

Walmart's housewares' merchants liked what they saw from NIB. Elizabeth Ganey, associate buyer for dishsoap and sponges at Walmart, said she particularly liked Speedy Scrubber's high sales rates at military commissaries—an attribute that struck a personal chord, as her father works at Scott Air Force Base outside St. Louis.

"The piece that is even more exciting is that this collaboration isn't just

putting Americans to work, it's creating employment opportunities for Americans with disabilities, for people who are blind," Shaffer said. "It takes a good story around American manufacturing and makes it even better."

That story begins at Alphapointe's Brooklyn manufacturing facility, where nearly 100 employees who are legally blind work on an assortment of products, many for the U.S. government. The Speedy Scrubber team is comprised of four people under the helm of John Perez, supervisor of Needlecraft, Assembly and Plastics.

A sighted employee cuts the nylon mesh to be sewn around the green, yellow or blue sponges. Pauline Doling sews the mesh on the left and right sides, trimming any hanging threads. Tomas Lopez inserts the sponge into the mesh. And Anthony Jording closes the sponge and makes sure the tag is centered. Then the sponges are put in sleeves and packaged in groups of two.

The employees use wood or metal guides to determine where to sew; once they touch the mesh with the guide, they know they can go no further. After that, it's a matter of having straight hands and good control of the foot pedal on the sewing machine.

"You have to have a straight hand, and a not-so-heavy foot," said Perez. "It's basically like driving a car. If you're too heavy on the gas pedal, you're going too fast."

Jording, blind from birth, is an Alphapointe veteran, having joined in 1996, when the organization was known as New York Industries for the Blind. Prior to that, he worked at Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired and at Helen Keller Services for the Blind. "You could say I've been all over the place," he quipped. Lopez, also blind from birth, has

been at Alphapointe since 1997, having previously worked at the Lighthouse as well. He came to the United States from Ecuador to join his family.

Doling lost her sight later in life. Diagnosed with diabetes when she



A favorite among commissary customers, the Speedy Scrubber is now available at select Walmart stores in the northeast.

lived in Jamaica, she was unable to afford proper medication. One day, while watching television, her sight went red. Several weeks later, she was declared legally blind.

Her troubles didn't end there. After her husband left Doling and her daughter, she moved to New York City to find a job, but could no longer perform the nanny work that supported her previously. "It was an unbelievably difficult time," she said.

Then she got a second chance – two second chances actually. She found her way to Alphapointe and began sewing for the organization's military and government customers. And she met and fell in love with the man who answered the bell on her first day at the agency, Ronnie McNeil, who works with plastics. The two were married earlier this year.

The partnership with Walmart sparked a lot of interest among the crew, marking the first time the products they produced were available at a major retailer. "When I mentioned it to Pauline, Tomas and Anthony, there was some excitement," said Perez. "They like knowing that the products they make every day will be sold at a place like Walmart."

The sponge may be the beginning of a larger partnership with Walmart and a higher visibility for NIB and its associated agencies among private sector retailers. Russell said NIB made a pitch at this year's open call for new products. Walmart's Ganey noted that the Speedy Scrubber is selling well, prompting discussions about expanding inventory of the sponges, as well as adding dish cleaning products produced by NIB agencies, to the retailer's offerings.

NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch said the organization "continues to focus on the federal marketplace, which is at the core of our mission, and is always interested in new partnerships that will create jobs for people who are blind. We hope that being recognized as a reliable business partner by a national retailer of Walmart's stature will enhance our reputation and help us grow employment opportunities."

In the meantime, the partnership has other advantages. "With a company as large as Walmart and as sophisticated in its logistics, we have to be on our toes, be at our peak level of performance," Mabry said. "Working with a company like Walmart makes us better, and that's going to be benefit every customer we have, government or commercial." □

Andy Brownstein is a freelance writer based in the Washington, D.C. area.