Low-twist towels are primarily manufactured in India. The MicroCotton brand name, to date the best-known of the branded low-twist labels, is a trademark registered to Sharadha Terry Products Ltd., Coimbatore, India, and is also available for use by its customers. In the United States, the MicroCotton label appears on WestPoint Stevens' top-drawer Seduction towels, which retail around \$19.99, and Venus Home's' Embrace towels, which retail around \$14.99, as well as on better private label towels at Dillard's and Federated Department Stores.

Aside from Sharadha, Welspun and Trident are among the largest producers of the low-twist, high-absorbency towel. All three sell their products in the United States to suppliers and retailers.





Searching for the softest towel

Marvin Lazaro, Staff Staff -- Home Textiles Today, February 24, 2003

From New York to Frankfurt and back again, a wave of ultra-soft/high-absorbency towels has been rolling into showrooms in recent months under a variety of monikers — low-twist, no-twist, zero-twist, MicroCotton and microfiber, among them — raising the stakes in the soft towel race, but also raising a cloud of confusion about what's what.

While construction specs and prices vary across the offerings, all share a common mission; to create a high-value towel that breaks the price-eroding downward spiral of commodization in the moderate-to-better towel category.

"Retailers are under pressure. They see what's happening with Egyptian [heading into] Wal-Mart and Target. They have to look for better fabrications," said Dan Harris, vp marketing and product development, Revere Mills, Niles, IL.

Like ringspun cotton, low-twist/high-absorbency towels are offered in a variety of colors and with various end treatments. Several suppliers also offer a jacquard construction. Depending on size, weight and channel of distribution, a bath towel typically retails between \$15 and \$20. Home Source International is among several suppliers that plans to offer an even heavier towel priced around \$30.

"I don't know if consumers understand [the greater value]," said Vivie von Walstrom, executive vp and corporate design director of Venus Home Fashions, Foot Hill Ranch, CA. "They can see it's much thicker and plusher, though."

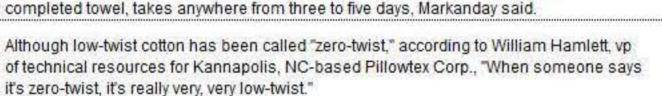
"Retailers understand low-twist construction now," said Keith Sorgeloos, president of Home Source International, which is based in Atlanta. "We originally had a tough time placing this product. I think it was about a year before we had our first significant

The first basic difference between low-twist and ringspun cotton is the fibers used to construct both. As P.K. Markanday, joint managing director of Trident Group of Punjab, India said, "All fibers are not created equal." While ringspun towels use a combination of long and short staple cotton fiber, low-twist must be constructed only from longer

of long and short staple cotton fiber, low-twist must be constructed only from longer staple cotton yarn.

After the fiber is made into yarn, it must be wound with Poly Vinyl Alcohol (PVA) yarn to keep the cotton intact without the need for twisting. The PVA dissolves during dyeing,

leaving the extremely low-twist cotton behind. The entire process, from yarn to



Twisted cotton yarn towels, which have been the norm for decades in the United States, are thinner and rougher when compared to low-twist, that has a much better hand, is noticeably fluffier and does not pill or shed an excessive amount of lint. Manufacturers and suppliers of low-twist towels also maintain they are more absorbent than ringspun towels.

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Micro-fiber towels are also crowding into the ultra-touch/high-absorbency arena with a manmade synthetic product constructed primarily from a blend of polyester and nylon with polyamide.

Through a chemical process, the two materials and the polyamide are bonded. The result is a cloth that goes through another process to split its fiber into a smaller "micro" fiber, creating tiny channels. The finished fabric is extremely absorbent and has a static charge, enabling it to attract and retain dust more effectively than paper or natural cloths.

According to Keith Szewczyk, director of marketing for Excello Products of Chicago, micro-fiber towels are able to absorb five to seven times their weight in water.

"We guarantee that our towel is the thirstiest towel you'll ever buy," Szewczyk said. "We've sold thousands of these, and I've only given three people their money back."

waffle, cut terry and loop terry, with various patterns and in various weights. The heavier the micro-fiber towel, the more water it can absorb. Compared to ringspun cotton, Szewczyk said, micro-fiber is more absorbent.

Like cotton, micro-fiber towels are available in various colors and weaves, such as

Retail prices for Excello's kitchen towels range from \$3.99 to \$4.99, depending on weight and size. The line, which bears the label Kitchen Millennium, is available through a variety of distribution channels, including discounters and specialty stores.

Both Excello and Aussino Home offer bath towels. Excello's is marketed as a spa line with a towel, hair wrap and sport size all available in different weaves and colors. Excello's spa line varies in retail price from \$14.99 to \$29.99. New York-based Aussino gears its line toward the bathroom with bath, hand and wash sizes and gives it a decorative feel through embroideries as well as solid and striped offerings. Aussino's bath towels retail from \$10.99 to \$11.99.

According to Steve Lewis, president, Aussino and several other companies are experimenting in combining micro-fiber with cotton to make it softer, give it a better hand and perhaps make it more appealing to those who are unsure about having a synthetic product as a towel.

Unlike low-twist cotton, micro-fiber is available from several different countries, including Japan, Korea and China. Szewczyk believes micro-fiber will continue to grow in popularity at all levels of retail. He envisions a destination shop filled with everything from kitchen to bath towels and everything in between, all constructed from micro-fiber.

Soft sell

Since both low-twist/high absorbency and micro-fiber towels are relatively new to the home textiles scene, suppliers are still exploring where they can go in terms of sales, marketing and product innovation.

Sorgeloos, through Home Source's own Home & Harmony brand, is branching into MicroCotton robes, bath mats, bath rugs, throws, blankets and sheets.

Von Walstrom said Venus has developed point-of-sale signage specifically for its own Embrace line of MicroCotton in the hopes of educating consumers about low-twist's absorbency properties and value.

Pillowtex also is offering point-of-sale signage to help explain the ultra-soft concept, as well as some description of the product's qualities in its advertising, said Eileen Phillips, marketing manager for towels. The mill has three low-twist towels now either in the market or about to roll out. For the department store channel, Royal Velvet Intrigue, with an "unusual" dobby and matching end hem, retails at \$14.99 and coordinates with RV Intrigue sheeting. The Softest Towel by Fieldcrest has a textured rib and also retails around \$14.99. Microtouch by Fieldcrest, for the mid-price retail channel, features five rows of tucks at the bottom and retailers at \$9.99.

"It's another handle in a sea of handles," Phillips said. "Retailers understand it once we explain it to them. And they get it immediately once they feel it."

How the products are marketed may ultimately determine their ability to command better price points in the highly competitive towel business. As Welspun executive director Rajesh Mandawewala noted of the various low-twist/high-absorbency towels streaming into the market: "It is catching on fast. Everybody is taking a keen interest."

Welspun, New Delhi, India, is creating differentiation for its Ultra Cotton low-twist line by offering three size and weight combinations that range in retail from \$14.99 to \$19.99, he said.

For Revere Mills, which is producing a \$12.99 "soft-twist" towel for the big box and better retail channels, the race is already on to bring out an even softer towel at the upcoming March/April New York Home Textiles Market.

"Look at all the buzz words for soft towels: Egyptian, Pima, combed. We continue to see these things being devalued," Harris said. "So the little guys need to keep moving ahead to come up with the next soft towel."



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