



CLS—

COLLABORATION 'ESSENTIAL' TO OVERCOMING COVID

Michigan F&B/uniform rental mixed independent leveraged close ties to customers & staff to get past pandemic

By Jack Morgan

Continental Linen Services (CLS), a 123-year-old family-owned food and beverage/uniform rental/mixed commercial laundry company based in Kalamazoo, MI, has seen firsthand the economic destruction wrought by the COVID-19 and how companies in the Wolverine State have worked together to get through the pandemic.

CLS President Kurt Vander Meer shared an example of collaboration involving a small restaurant that was about to give up when a large order came through that helped them bridge the gap during on-and-off shutdowns that ran from March 2020 through June 22 of this year. “They got creative,” Vander Meer says of area eateries. “They did some take out,” adding that area businesses also have done their

part to help small restaurants survive. In this case, pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, based in nearby Portage, MI, came to the aid of the restaurant. “We got a little café down the road here,” says Vander Meer, a second-generation owner. “He was wondering how he was going to make it. The next thing you know, Pfizer calls and says, ‘We want you to deliver 500 lunches every Wednesday going forward.’”

Ironically, the 1,300-acre Pfizer complex was closely involved in efforts with its German partner, BioNTech, to develop and produce the two-shot vaccine regimen that’s now helping people worldwide defeat COVID. In effect, this collaboration paid dividends all around. Vander Meer says similar efforts, mostly on a smaller scale, have taken place among scores of businesses across Michigan’s lower peninsula that CLS services.

As for the situation today, Vander Meer says that while Michigan is now open for business, CLS is facing many of the same post-pandemic challenges confronting other food and beverage (F&B)/uniform rental/mixed operators. “Michigan seems to have gone

from closed and cautious, to wide open,” he says. “I think the vaccine and other parameters our state directed us on is working. The only problem now is—our status is wide open—and the business community (specifically F&B and resorts, or anywhere there is water) is booming past its abilities to supply or service. It’s truly a juggling game.” Regarding the labor situation, he adds that “Finding competent staff for our production facility and route areas is truly a challenge right now, and most likely will not ease for quite some time.”

CREATIVE, CONFIDENT COMMUNITY

While CLS is limited in its ability to boost the local labor supply or strengthen supply chains delivering textiles and other goods, it can and will continue to focus internally on keeping morale high with an unshakable sense of teamwork in dealing with these challenges. Part of this motivation comes from the knowledge that CLS is considered an “essential” business. This message was driven home during the pandemic, and it continues to resonate with CLS staff. “I do feel that COVID made everybody

realize, especially our route guys, how important our industry is,” says Sarah Wrubel, senior vice president and an owner of the business. “I don’t think they realized how important they were at all until COVID put it right in their faces that, ‘Hey, I get to keep working because my customer needs me during this time.’”

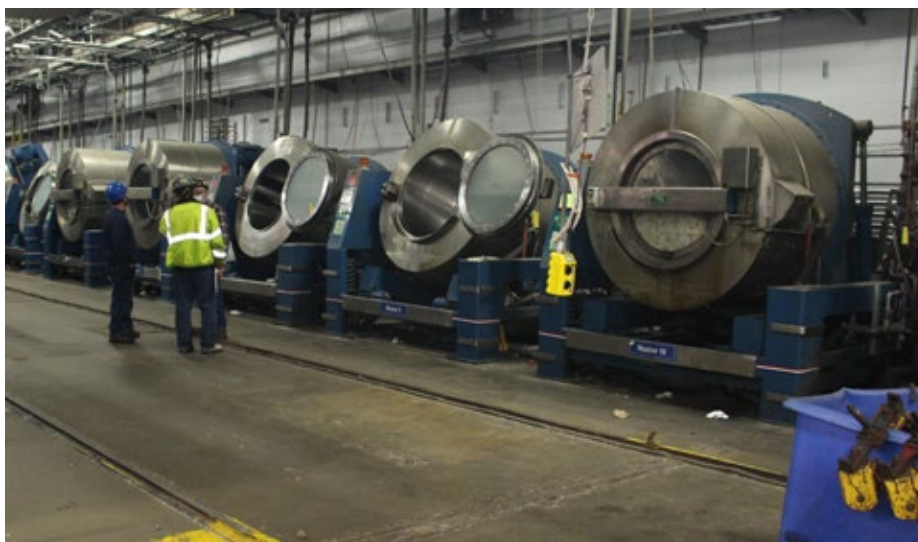
“It gave them that sense of pride. I’d say ‘Hey, I’m in an industry that is very essential,’” adds Wrubel, who is Vander Meer’s niece and a third-generation owner. “We keep saying that a lot because it’s true. Same with our production people, ‘We need you here cleaning towels because our customers need them.’” As long as that spirit endures, Wrubel is confident that CLS can navigate whatever challenges the post-pandemic environment can serve up. “Our family company can make it through this with their help,” she says.

Vander Meer echoes Wrubel’s confidence, saying, “We’re strong. We didn’t get to be 123 years old by doing things wrong.” CLS works to nurture a sense of a loyalty that grows out of working for a locally owned family business with deep roots in the community. While CLS has its share of staff turnover, especially among recent hires, many others among its roughly 120-member staff are long-time team members who feel they’re part of the family. “At the end of the day, it comes down to relationships,” Vander Meer says.

Throughout the pandemic, CLS took extensive steps not only to protect team members from the virus but to keep them motivated. However, the company’s focus on proactive staff outreach predated COVID. It begins—naturally—with onboarding. In a meeting room, we interviewed Wrubel, Vander Meer; and his brother Ron, who is CLS’ CEO and Sarah’s father; plus Executive Vice President Bill Aton, on a range of recruitment/retention issues. On a far wall, we saw a bulletin board with a large decal of a tree. Among the branches were small leaves made of construction paper—each bearing the



ABOVE: (from top) A slingload of clean dry mats awaits processing in the finishing area. A team member feeds isolation gowns into a small-piece folder; another team member feeds barmops into a towel folder.



ABOVE: (from top) A team member places mats on mat-rolling equipment. Team members feed large-piece flatwork items into a feeder/ironer; team members confer in the plant's wash aisle, which recently saw the addition of shuttle equipment that moves good from the washer/extractors to the dyers.

name of an employee or “team member.” New hires receive a “Welcome” card with a tree image and a cut-out leaf. The card is signed by Wrubel, who oversees human resources as well as production. Inside is a piece of paper that says, “Welcome to CLS!” with a QR code. New team members scan the code with their cell phones, and it takes them to a video about the company. Team members sign the leaf and add their names to the tree on the bulletin board. In the video, Wrubel describes each leaf on the tree (or team member) as critical to the day-to-day success of the company.

Founded in 1899 as the Kalamazoo Laundry Co., the Vander Meer family bought the business in 1966. Ron and Kurt's father, Ted Vander Meer, was a company employee when the opportunity came to buy Kalamazoo Laundry. He purchased the company, and renamed it after the Lincoln Continental automobile, according to the website and video. CLS has expanded steadily across Michigan ever since, starting with a move in 1980 to the current plant at 4200 Manchester Rd. The following year, CLS added a branch in Cadillac. Additional branches were added in Livonia (metro-Detroit) in 1995, Grand Rapids (1997) and Saginaw (1999). In 2002, the company acquired a small laundry in Alpena. That's now used exclusively to process mats. All other processing is done in Kalamazoo. The video states that Ted died from cancer several years ago. Ever since, CLS has raised thousands of dollars in charitable donations in a search of better treatments and, ultimately, a cure for cancer.

Many companies offer staff picnics, barbecues or pizza parties to show team members they're appreciated. CLS has these kinds of activities too, but they go the extra mile. For example, they staged a “Prom Night” on Feb. 29, 2020—barely two weeks before COVID-19 hit in mid-March. Wrubel says the idea was to give adults a chance to dress up and have fun, while socializing with co-workers and their spouses

or partners. “Ironically, it was a masquerade-themed prom, so people had masks of a different kind on!” Wrubel says.

In the plant, Wrubel’s focus is on taking a proactive approach to staff to make sure they’re in a safe, clean and orderly environment with advanced technology. We got a look inside the 40,000-square-foot (3,716-square-meter) laundry during a walk-through of the CLS facility.

IN THE PLANT

Team members move carts of soiled items in reusable bags from the loading dock to a cart dumper. Staff then open the bags. They place bar mops and other towels up to a vacuum tube that whisks them away via an Automation Dynamics system to a sling bound for the wash aisle. Other goods go up a conveyor to a series of 64 soil-sorting chutes. Team members here place various items in the ETECH soil-sorting system. When the goods reach the correct weight for the washer/extractors, a computer dispatches them to a holding area in the ceiling to await processing.

“We’re very much a mixed plant,” says Wrubel, who led our tour, along with Kurt. “That actually helped us during COVID.” While the plant processes a significant quantity of F&B linens and uniforms, there’s also a good quantity of outpatient medical textiles, including scrubs and patient gowns. Dust control, including mats, mops and cleaning rags, also are prominent, as well as industrial garments. Stepping over to the wash aisle, we see 12, 450 lb. Brim Laundry Machinery Co. washer/extractors and one 275 lb. Brim washer. There are five 450 lb. Brim dryers. During the COVID pandemic, CLS moved forward with the installation of a shuttle system that automates the movement of clean wet goods from the washer/extractors to the dryers. Wrubel says the slow period brought on by the pandemic was a good time to do the installation. “This is my

personal opinion, to do the projects while we’re quiet,” she says. “I never would have been able to install those conveyors—having multiple dryers down for that project for two weeks—if we were in regular time. Because we were in COVID, we were not as busy.” The plant’s pre-covid throughput was nearly 470,000 lbs. (213,180 kg.) per week. Weekly throughput in mid-July was roughly 447,407 lbs. (202,940 kg.)

per week. It’s expected to increase as the Michigan economy reopens. While investing in new machinery during the pandemic entailed a degree of financial risk, Wrubel says it was necessary for the company’s future. “Short-term right now it’s scary to spend money,” she says, noting that CLS is preparing to install a new dissolved air floatation (DAF) system for wastewater as well.

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ABOVE: A safety message for team members; one of the company's trucks that service the plant's 45 routes across lower-peninsula Michigan. The CLS leadership team: (l/r) Executive Vice President Bill Aton, President Kurt Vander Meer; Senior Vice President/Owner Sarah Wrubel; CEO Ron Vander Meer.

"It really is. We have the faith that we're doing the right thing."

Saving water and ensuring that the plant operates in a fully compliant and environmentally proactive fashion is another element of CLS's focus on investment. The company is certified to TRSA's Clean Green program, which requires plant inspections and documented adherence to best management practices on a range of issues, including energy use, recycling and waste management. "We've had (Clean Green) for about eight years now," Wrubel says, noting that the plant has a Kemco heat reclaimer. CLS also has experimented with propane fuel for its trucks. "We wanted to focus on our industry being green, as much as possible," she says. About 18 months ago, CLS installed a UV light system that injects hydroxyl radicals to sanitize tunnel press water so it can return to the rinse zone. The system also conserves water and energy, she says. Other wash aisle equipment includes a customer owned goods (COG) area with two 135 lb. Pellerin Milnor Corp. washers, two 170 lb. Milnor dryers and one 120 lb. dryer. Most of the goods CLS supplies to customers are rental textiles. Starting this month, laundry chemistry is provided by Gurtler Industries Inc. Overall water use is 1.7 gallons per lb. for incoming water. The company receives evaporation credits for water lost during the drying and finishing processes.

Moving to the finishing area, we see two laborsaving Inwatec mat rollers. There are five ironer lines in the plant. These include one Super Sylon with a G.A. Braun feeder and folder for sheets. There are two Super Sylons with a JENSEN bottom-up stacker for aprons and a JENSEN napkin drape & store. A fifth ironer is a Kannegiesser with a feeder and folder for table linens. The ironers are fitted with WesVic™ Piece Counters to track production.

The mechanical room includes two 250 HP boilers, two shaker screens for removing lint from water and the aforementioned heat reclaimer.

The plant has automated much of its towel folding with a Rennco Dual Side autobagger and two other bagging machines. There's also a Foltex small-piece folder for isolation gowns, patient gowns, bedpads, thermal blankets and similar items, along with two Air Chicago towel folders.

Garments are finished in a nearby building at 3000 Covington Rd. Here there is a Leonard tunnel finisher and a Colmac triple buck shirt press. CLS' rental garments come with ultra-high frequency radio frequency identification (RFID) tags. Workwear is tracked with equipment from Positek RFID.

CLS has long provided its customers with facility services products, such as cleaning supplies. However, this business took off during the pandemic with the addition of hand sanitizers and other personal protective equipment. CLS worked with a local machine shop to fabricate a dispensing stand for hand sanitizer when these systems were unavailable from traditional vendors due to high demand. Drivers on the plant's 45 routes also sold sanitary gear while making their rounds, Wrubel says. "Pretty early on, we had 'CLS Essential Services,' which was a package of disinfectant, face masks, all the PPE." Particularly in the early days of the pandemic, CLS route sales professionals and customers checked on each other's health and business challenges, Kurt says. "It was a true partnership."


ROAD TO RECOVERY

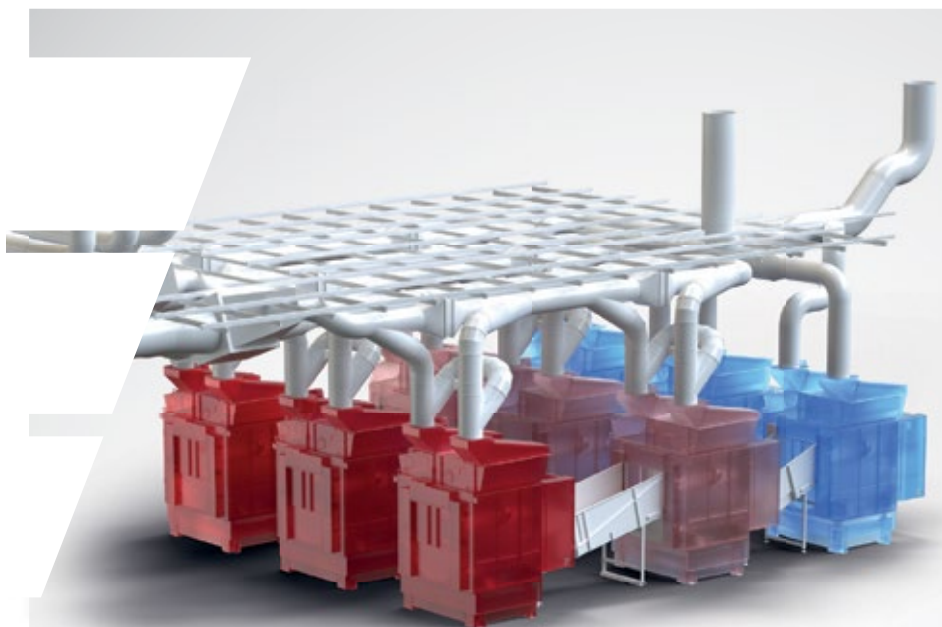
Collaboration—both internally and with customers—has helped CLS get through the pandemic. Now as things inch back toward normal, Kurt is drawing as many positive lessons as possible. "I'm just saying that things are going to change, so embrace it," he says. "Because of COVID we've learned a lot of things. Habits change, buying habits change." Those shifts will likely include a greater emphasis on hygiene, which could drive more facility services sales. Staff collaboration also will

continue with CLS's incentive program for team members who submit ideas for improving production or route operations. Team members earn gift cards for any suggestion. CLS' recovery won't be easy. But the company has a strong foundation of sustainability, efficiency and safety on which to build.

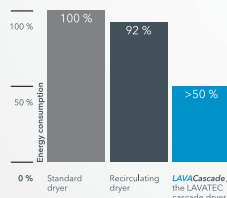
Near the entrance to the annex building stands an easel. Mounted on it is a white poster board with a logo that says

"CLS Strong." Team members from the branches and the plant signed the poster and presented it to the executive team to thank them for their efforts during the pandemic. That's the kind of collaboration that can enable CLS to emerge from COVID stronger than ever. **TS**

 **JACK MORGAN** is senior editor of *Textile Services*. Contact him at 877.770. 9274 or jmorgan@trsa.org.



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