



SERVICE LINEN—

'PEOPLE FIRST, CUSTOMER FOCUSED, SYSTEMS DRIVEN'

Seattle-area independent is now recovering nicely from a pandemic that put its proactive spirit to the ultimate test

By Jack Morgan

When news first began to emerge about the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Service Linen Supply President Bob Raphael was—as luck would have it—just returning from a visit to the country where most observers say the virus originated.

“I came home from China on Jan. 15,” says Raphael, whose family-owned food and beverage (F&B)/health-care laundry is based in Renton, WA, roughly 11 miles south of downtown Seattle. As a hands-on business owner, Raphael wasn’t in the “People’s Republic” to hike the Great Wall. Instead, he was scouting machinery options for his 50,000-square-foot (4,645-square-meter) laundry located in a bustling area of

this close-in suburb. “I was over there looking at equipment,” Raphael says. “(COVID) had just started there.”

Like many Americans, Raphael initially doubted that the new influenza-type illness would have much of an impact back home. “When we got back here, I thought ‘There’s no way it’s coming over.’ But the day I arrived was the day that the first case was confirmed in the United States in Lynnwood a few miles from our plant...” Readers may recall that the Seattle area—perhaps in part due to its proximity to Asian air routes—was one of the first areas of the U.S. to feel the impact of the pandemic. “This was the epicenter of COVID,” Raphael says. “So having been to China and seen what went on and seeing everybody wear masks, we thought soon after that, ‘We’ve got to prepare and get masks, cleaning supplies and PPEs.’ And it wasn’t easy to get them, even then. Amazon was sold out. We had to dig pretty deep. We ordered before being advised to wear masks by the government,” so we were prepared and had them on-site.”

MANAGING THROUGH COVID

Within days of his return from Asia, Service Linen quickly pivoted into pandemic mode. Customer demand, especially from fine-dining restaurants, the largest sector of Service Linen’s client base, collapsed. Internally, Human Resources Director LeAnh Mai organized efforts based on guidance from Washington State’s Labor and Industries and Health Department as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to protect plant and route staff. Service Linen implemented policies and procedures that are now familiar to everyone in the linen, uniform and facility services industry: masks for people on the plant floor and route drivers, social distancing, universal use of hand sanitizer, temperature checks, strict sick-leave policies and more. Every team member who called out sick would get a call directly from Mai to screen for symptoms to determine if testing and quarantining was needed. “We felt it was better to be extra cautious,” she says. “Those team members who were sick needed to show a negative test before returning to work.” During a visit to the plant earlier this

year, Mai confirmed that the precautions were effective, with very few employees contracting COVID. “There were a few (cases),” she says. “None were traced to work exposure with most picking it up from family members at home.”

Since then, it’s been a bumpy ride for Service Linen. Raphael notes a series of waves related to the pandemic. “This market has been a little crazy because we kind of double dipped,” he says. “By that I mean at the beginning we were way down. Our worst-case-scenario was about 80%. Food and beverage was down over 80%. The company was down just over 70%. Medical wasn’t down as much, but it was down close to 50%. So we were hurting.”

We recently contacted Raphael for an update on the pandemic; he gave us a cautiously upbeat assessment. For starters, the area’s F&B market has staged a significant recovery. “Many restaurants have reopened, especially smaller neighborhood restaurants,” he says. “In our markets, many of the larger travel and convention restaurants have closed permanently. Our fine-dining revenue is approximately 70% of pre-pandemic levels.” As for the outlook for 2022, he’s adjusting to the new reality. “We think the business that is coming back, has come back,” Raphael says. “We are at

a new baseline and are moving forward from there.”

Meanwhile, Raphael says the company is continuing to operate with extensive safety procedures. “We still are all wearing masks in the plant and of course at all customer sites,” he says. “We believe this gives us the best chance of keeping everyone safe.” When asked about OSHA’s recently issued “Emergency Temporary Rule” requiring businesses with 100 or more people to either get vaccinated or submit to weekly testing for COVID, Raphael says he isn’t worried. “Our Director of Human Resources LeAnh Mai did a fantastic job of working individually with each of our Team Members to help them understand the need for vaccinations and to help set appointments for them,” he says. “Our team is over 97% vaccinated with most of the unvaccinated meeting exemption requirements and testing regularly.”

Service Linen’s focus on putting its people first—particularly when COVID struck—naturally extends to protecting its customers and the environment in which both operate. Those core values are reflected in the company’s commitment to TRSA certification programs, including Clean Green and Hygienically Clean. While doing the right thing is often its own reward, Raphael says the certification program has given

his company a competitive edge with restaurant customers, as well as the outpatient-medical facilities serviced by the company’s MediCleanse division. “It’s huge for us—both in the medical and food and beverage,” Raphael says of the company’s participation in Hygienically Clean and other certification programs. These include HLAC (Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council) and NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) certifications along with Hygienically Clean Food Service and Healthcare and Clean Green.

The latter certification is appealing, even to restaurants in the environmentally conscious Seattle market. “It might not matter as much in Arkansas,” says Jesse Jassny, director of healthcare sales. “Nothing against Arkansas,” he adds with a laugh. “But here in the Northwest, environmental initiatives and stewardship for the environment is very compelling.” Raphael adds that Hygienically Clean and Clean Green dovetail somewhat with healthcare groups that are trying to reduce garment waste, while conserving the natural resources used to process flatwork and garments. Restaurants typically are more bottom-line oriented, but some customers do have an environmental focus. “There are a few people who do,” he says, speaking of pro-‘green’ restaurateurs. Yet the certification seldom is an issue in F&B requests for proposals

BELOW: (l/r) A Chicago Dryer/Mobics scanning system on this ironer can detect small tears or stains, thus providing customers with an extra measure of linen quality; a conveyor system at the end of the plant’s tunnel washer takes clean, pressed goods onto the next stage of processing. On the opening page: Margarita Gonzalez and Martha Stanford, two longtime employees, take timeout for a photo on a mezzanine level overlooking the plant’s wash floor.





ABOVE: (clockwise, from top) Employees feed flatwork into a sheet feeder; an employee feeds soiled items into a vacuum system that whisks them away to a sling prior to washing. Employees feed small-piece textiles into an ironer. An employee inspects a chef coat before it moves to packout/delivery.

(RFPs). Healthcare providers are more proactive on the conservation issue. “We’ve seen environment questions in most RFPs for medical,” Raphael says. “They want to know what we’re doing. They want to know about the environmental issues.” *Textile Services* got a look at how Service Linen puts its environment and infection-control protocols to work during a walk-through of their plant.

IN THE PLANT

Service Linen’s roots stretch back through previous owners to the early 20th century, Raphael says. The Jassny family acquired the business, then known as Renton Laundry, in 1946. They renamed it Service Linen Supply. A decade later, Frank Raphael, Bob’s father, joined the business as a partner. Today, David Jassny’s son Jesse—as previously noted—is director of healthcare sales.

Service Linen’s reconditioned headquarters once housed a Ford dealership in the early 1920s. In recent years, Service Linen added an eye-catching brick, steel and glass exterior in cooperation with local authorities for this historic district. Inside is an extensive laundry operation that makes maximum use of its production space.

Our tour, led by Raphael and Director of Operations D.J. Lipman, began in the soil area. A building addition added in 2002 gave the soil area a 32-foot (9.7-meter) ceiling. Outpatient medical and F&B goods are kept separate throughout the process, starting with incoming soil sorting. All garments, including healthcare and F&B goods, such as chef coats, are equipped with ultra-high frequency radio frequency identification (RFID) tags from Positek RFID. They are scanned in on the soil side and also on the clean side of the plant.

Employees sort both the flatwork and garments into slings. When goods reach a set weight, they move via a rail

system and are stored in a ceiling area until space in the wash-aisle machinery is available for them. A computer system dispatches slings as needed to the tunnel washer for processing. Staff move cartloads of small-lot or stain-rewash items to one of several washer/extractors. Virtually all of the goods processed here are rental items that Service Linen provides to its roughly 3,000 customers. In 2012, Service Linen installed a Pellerin Milnor tunnel washer. This machine serves as the workhorse for wash floor. We watched as goods moved on the overhead rail system. The textiles then dropped from the sling into the mouth of the tunnel, which features 10, 250 lb. (113 kg.) compartments. Raphael praised the performance of the tunnel, which averages .6 gallons of water per pound. The plant features a walled separation of clean and soiled goods to prevent cross-contamination. It also has negative air flow that constantly moves air in the soil area away from the clean side.

Raphael credits Unitex Textile Rental Services Chairman Michael Potack with encouraging him to diversify into processing textile goods for healthcare providers, such as clinics and surgicenters. The company's work with that sector began in 1995. Today, work for the MediCleanse division takes up a significant share of the company's throughput. "Michael Potack inspired me to get into medical textiles, and we appreciated his sage advice," Raphael says.

Other equipment in the wash aisle includes five 900 lb. Ellis washer/extractors and four Pellerin Milnor pony washers. Wash chemicals include AdvaCare™, an EPA-registered disinfecting detergent from Ecolab.

Stepping through to the clean side of the plant, we find a finishing area with an eclectic mix of equipment from an array of vendors. Like the China visit noted above, Raphael says he's traveled to Europe several times to shop for machinery to enhance his operation. He's satisfied that he found equipment that

In-House 'Facebook' Boosts Staff Solidarity

On a wall near a stairwell in the Service Linen Supply plant in Renton, WA, is a flier touting a website for "My SLS Family" ("SLS" was coined a few years ago for Service Linen Supply.) This project was spearheaded by LeAnh Mai, Service Linen's director of human resources. Her goal was to help employees get to know each other better and build a stronger sense of staff unity. We learned more about this program and other initiatives aimed at boosting teamwork and recruitment/retention during an interview with Service Linen's management team, including President Bob Raphael, Director of Healthcare Sales Jesse Jassny, Director of Operations D.J. Lipman, CFO Ken Stewart and Director of Service David Rish-Brown.

Mai says that Service Linen has purchased the "Communiifier" software program that serves as an in-house Facebook. With this intranet program, employees can post information or comments online to share with colleagues. "Employees have log-ins," says Mai. "David (Rish-Brown) publishes service weekly updates there. Jesse does the same, so does D.J. But I think it's just a matter of getting information out to team members and to the public. We try to make it very family oriented." She adds that they request photos of new babies or pets, shots from weekend hiking trips or weather events, such as heavy snow, which is rare in the Seattle area. "I posted my snowman pictures!"

Raphael says the idea for the in-house website came from reading books on team-member engagement. "We hired Clean and Simple Marketing a division of an industrial uniform-rental company, CITY Laundering of Oelwein, IA, that specializes in helping non-competitor independent operators enhance their communication efforts," he says. "Emily Hauber, director of communications for Clean and Simple Marketing, helps us manage all of our internal communication and social media recruiting. Fresh content is critical to this project's success and Emily and her team provide a steady supply. keeping us on track."

At first, the COVID-19 pandemic distracted staff from spending time on the "My SLS Family" site. But Raphael characterizes the project as a "slow build." He's convinced it ultimately will pay dividends in terms of improved morale and staff longevity. "It's nice for me because it's a lot like Facebook," he says. "We can post online. So when I see a post for a job well done that I never would have known about, I can now send them a thank you. I can reinforce the great thing that they did."

While employees have had a limited amount of "face time," My SLS Family offers an online platform for information-sharing. CITY staff helped jump-start the program by preparing brief bios on staff members and writing stories that then were posted for their team members to read. CITY and Service Linen staff meet regularly to discuss content and image-enhancement issues, such as reformatting the company's vision/mission statement. "They're giving us a lot of internal marketing advice," Raphael says. "And helping us with our social media recruiting team," he says, adding that Infinite Laundry oversees all of Service Linen's outside communications, including the website and videos. "They really understand our industry. They do fabulous work."

drives system efficiency while maximizing quality. “We went to Europe to find the state-of-the-art equipment that would provide the quality we require.”

Among the systems we saw on the clean side were four Kannegiesser large-piece sheet feeders. We watched as rows of employees fed flatwork into one of four Lapauw ironers. Two ironers are equipped with a Chicago Dryer/Mobics scanning systems that automatically

screens textiles for holes, stains, tears or other defects. “They really help us improve our quality,” Raphael says.

Other equipment includes:

- 6 450-500 lb. (204-226 kg.) dryers
- 4 Foltex folders for scrubs, napkins and small pieces

- 2 Jean Michel “Mini Neptune” (Girbau) folder
- An energy-saving heat-exchanger from Ludell
- A Colmac tunnel finisher used mainly for cubicle curtains

We next saw a Felins automated packaging system for napkins and other textiles. This labor-saving equipment moves goods automatically via conveyor, then covers and seals them in plastic for packout.

As for garments, Service Linen’s RFID tagging of inventory allows any of the company’s 150 employees to track the movement of goods to and from customer locations, thus reducing the risk of disputes over losses. The system also virtually eliminates garment shortages. Before the workwear goes through final checks in a “bundle verifier” the garments are tunnel finished in a Lapauw Hot Stream, which processes them shoulder to shoulder. Raphael says this process renders a high-quality press-like finish with excellent throughput. A Colmac triple buck also is used to press lab coats, each of which are hand inspected and touched-up with a hand iron.

Outgoing garments go through multiple sorts to place them in the correct order by route, customer and individual wearer. A robot voice approves bundles with the correct quantity of goods, saying “OK” when the items match a customer’s order. This system is also supplied by Positek RFID.

Beyond the finishing aisle, we saw rows of carts ready for loading onto the company’s trucks, plus racks of thousands of stored garments awaiting movement to customers. On one of the carts, Raphael points out that they adopted the use of office-style binder clips to connect route paperwork to the cart. This is a less-messy and more-reliable method than tape, he says.



TO BE OF SERVICE



MISSION

OUR MISSION IS TO ALLOW EACH INDIVIDUAL TEAM MEMBER TO “BE THE DIFFERENCE IN EVERYTHING YOU DO.”

TO DO ORDINARY THINGS BETTER THAN THEY HAVE EVER BEEN DONE BEFORE.

VISION

OUR GOAL IS TO BECOME THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST’S #1 MARKET SHARE LEADER IN NON-ACUTE HEALTHCARE AND FOOD & BEVERAGE BY UTILIZING

THE SERVICE WAY.

VALUES

- PEOPLE FIRST
- CUSTOMER FOCUSED
- SYSTEMS DRIVEN





ABOVE: Management Team (l/r): front row: Jesse Jasnny, dir. of healthcare sales; LeAnh Mai, dir. of human resources; middle row: Patrick Dembiczak, regional service manager; Ken Stewart, CFO; D.J. Lipman, dir. of operations; Grahame Lippert, key account manager; back row: Joedon Terry, dir. of sales, F&B; Bryan Carpmail, chief engineer; David Rish-Brown, dir. of service; and Bob Raphael, president.

Bringing a systems-driven approach to laundering is a key element of Service Linen's strategy. The other two legs of this three-legged stool are taking care of staff and satisfying customers. After the tour, Service Linen managers, including Lipman, Mai, Jassny and Raphael took questions. Joining them were Director of Service David Rish-Brown and CFO Ken Stewart.

QUALITY AS DIFFERENTIATOR

A key question is that in an age of consolidation, can independents like Service Linen not only survive but thrive in their respective markets? Raphael answers unequivocally "yes"—provided that independents "learn and grow and reinvest." He adds that with unexpected events like COVID, independents often can provide flexible solutions. "I think we tend to be a little more agile than some of the larger companies." Another advantage for independents is that they tend to have less management turnover. Rish-Brown and Lipman both worked for national companies. "Where we see a difference in the independent that we work for, we look for that mutually beneficial relationship with the customer for life," Rish-Brown says. As for leadership succession, Raphael says if no family members step forward, he's confident his team can carry on.

Finally, Service Linen is focused on quality—from infection control in the wash aisle to hand-ironing lab coats. "That's really critical for us" Raphael says. "That's how we try to differentiate ourselves...by building quality into our systems. Our core values are 'people first, customer focused, systems driven.' So the customer focus is on listening to their needs and then providing quality service and products they really want. Then building systems so the quality is assured." 

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Safety—A Critical Focus on Continuous Improvement

Service Linen Supply, Renton, WA, approaches incident prevention in the same way it deals with other key processes, from production to human resources and customer service. In each case, close monitoring and continuous improvement are essential. That rule applies across the board, from company President/owner Bob Raphael down to each of the company's 150 employees, including plant and route staff. However, management staff are expected to lead the way with a heightened emphasis on safety.

"We're trying to make sure that we address the issue, all the leadership team," says Director of Human Resources LeAnh Mai. "Everything is a learning opportunity. If something happened...what happened? Why did it happen? How can we correct it and how can we learn from that?"

That process starts with monthly meetings of the company's safety committee, which includes both hourly and management staff comparing notes on safety issues. "We try to have a fairly equal share of employees vs. management," she says, speaking of the committee. "The goal is to create a safety culture where they feel comfortable bringing up safety issues. We want to be proactive, before these issues become a safety hazard."

Mai and her colleagues got an unprecedented opportunity to put this philosophy to work when COVID-19 struck in early 2020. The Seattle area, which includes Renton, located roughly 11 miles south of downtown, was among the first parts of the U.S. to feel the impact of the pandemic. Service Linen responded quickly to the threat posed by the virus. "We really took COVID super seriously," says Raphael. "We had barriers, hand sanitizers, UV light disinfectants. We upgraded the uniforms. Historically, we didn't provide scrub pants; now we're providing the whole uniform." Raphael also credits Mai with working with local officials to get priority treatment for Service Linen staff once the COVID-19 vaccines came online in early 2021. Service Linen's drive to both inoculate staff and educate them on the virus has produced a major victory, with very few infections. In addition, more than 97% of the staff are now fully vaccinated. Most of those who haven't received their shots qualify for special exemptions and are tested regularly, Raphael says.

Beyond COVID, Service Linen has maintained a below-average experience factor or MOD of .8. Any rating below a "1" is considered better than average and earns high marks from insurance carriers. "For Washington state we're low," Mai says, adding that, "Obviously, we can do better." An emerging concern, she says, centers on the aging of staff members, particularly baby boomers (born 1946-1964) who could face an elevated risk of injury as they move closer to retirement.

As with other key elements of Service Linen's operations, safety is an area that is part of their continuous improvement efforts.