



WASH CYCLE LAUNDRY— A 'CLEAN SLATE' FOR GROWTH, POST-COVID

As a newcomer to Boston's 'mature market,' hoteliers elected to give Wash Cycle a fresh look after the pandemic

By Jack Morgan

Founded in 2010, Wash Cycle Laundry, a Philadelphia-based hospitality launderer, has evolved over 15 years from a bicycle-based B2C business into a multi-city hotel launderer with operations powered by high-tech machinery, step vans and straight trucks.

PEDALING FORWARD

A blog post from founder/CEO Gabriel Mandujano, announced in November 2017 that the company was “shifting gears” and that “Sadly, we no longer make house calls.” That announcement signaled the end of Wash Cycle’s bid to revive home laundry service, with an emphasis on liberating young professionals from laundry chores. The home laundry sector had thrived prior

to the 1950s, when expanded access to automatic home washers rendered it obsolete.

Fast-forward to today, and Wash Cycle is reaping the benefits of its move to hospitality. In 2023, the company—an independent backed by several investors—opened a new 25,000-square-foot (2,322-square-meter) plant in Lynn, MA. The plant is in a mixed business/residential area near Boston’s Logan International Airport. Today, Wash Cycle’s primary focus is on processing sheets, towels, duvets and related items for high-end hotels, spas and specialty businesses. Beyond Boston, Wash Cycle services hospitality outlets in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, DC. The laundry retains a bit of an independent streak that we often see with startups. Consider, for example, the company’s catchphrase, “Clean Laundry, Clean Planet, Clean Slates.” The statement identifies three-priorities: quality service, environmental conservation and giving people who’ve experienced homelessness, addiction, incarceration or other challenges, a chance to make a fresh start in the laundry business.

The shift to hotel laundry was straightforward a business decision, Mandujano says, and he and his team have no regrets about parking their bicycles, figuratively speaking, that is. They are still used in limited numbers to service small businesses. “We started with B2C (business to consumer),” he says. “We we’re always doing small businesses from the very beginning. But yes, we stopped doing consumer in 2017.” At that time, the company shifted its focus to commercial, or “B2B” business-to-business service. “At that point, most of our customers were commercial anyway,” Mandujano says. “So we clearly had to decide to specialize. So we chose the business side, basically.”

Wash Cycle currently employs 150 people in plants in Philadelphia, Windsor Mill, MD; and Lynn. This article focuses on the Boston-area facility. Wash Cycle opened its first Boston plant in 2018. Growth in hospitality was moving along steadily. Then in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Wash Cycle fought to stay open as the hotel business tanked. “We never shut down,” Mandujano says. “We got the PPP (Payroll Protection Plan) money like everybody else. We retained as

many people as we could.” Amid the slowdown, Wash Cycle capitalized on a few emergency-driven opportunities. “There were a couple of pandemic-related contracts we were able to secure,” he says. These included hotels that remained open to house healthcare and emergency professionals.

The irony of the pandemic was that for a company that prides itself on giving second chances to employee prospects, COVID-19 gave Wash Cycle a fresh look in terms of customer interest. “Ultimately for us,” Mandujano says. “I think it was a big opportunity because when everybody started opening up again, there was like a clean slate. They were evaluating their relationships.” While the pandemic had hurt business, Wash Cycle picked up a number of small accounts in the down market. That set the stage for growth once

the pandemic abated. “So even though each account was giving us less than they did before, we exited COVID with a lot more accounts than we went in with,” he says.

As the market recovered in 2022, Wash Cycle’s business grew in proportion to its a broader base. The expansion quickly outpaced capacity at the company’s smaller location. That justified the move to the larger facility that we toured this spring.

PLANT: ENTER THE ‘DRAGON’

The Wash Cycle plant is located in a nondescript building at 626 Lynnway St., a main drag in Lynn (population 100,000). A small sign on a glass door in front is the only thing we saw on the

exterior that confirmed that we’d arrived at the right location. Inside is a small outer office that looks a bit like the occupants had recently moved in, amid boxes and papers on desks. We interviewed Mandujano and General Manager John Lowrey, here, rather than in a board room or private office. Near the ceiling on a wall facing the street, we saw a tribute to the plant’s diverse workforce. Flags strung across the wall represented a dozen or more countries, primarily in Central and South America. These represent the staff’s countries of origin, Lowrey says.

Stepping through a door, we entered the plant floor. Here we saw that diverse staff in action, as well as numerous examples of modern equipment that’s designed to enhance their productivity, while saving labor. With that said, the plant has no overhead rail system. This

BELOW: An employee feeds flatwork items in the finishing department; a view of the plant’s wastewater-treatment system; an employee moves finished textiles from a folder stacker; on the opening page, a view of spreader/feeders at the front end of the plant’s two ironer lines.





ABOVE: (from top) A view of the plant's "Laundry Dragon™" tunnel washer; employees feed flatwork into an ironer line; (l/r) Wash Cycle founder/CEO Gabriel Mandujano; Ed Kirejczyk, president, Sea-lion America; John Lowrey, Wash Cycle general manager; and Caroline Wojcicki, vice president, Sea-lion America.

is due to the limited ceiling height in the building, a former dairy-processing facility, Mandujano says. As we walked to the rear of the building, we saw the doors to several loading docks, along with dozens of large black carts loaded with soiled flatwork from Wash Cycle's 20 hotel customers. These textiles—virtually all customer-owned goods (COG)—arrive mainly presorted from the hotels. Employees keep each customer's goods in distinct batches as they roll carts onto a scale for weighing. Staff then move them to the wash aisle for processing. Next we came face to face with the "Dragon™."

That's the registered trademark name for the plant's tunnel washer from Sea-lion. The words "Laundry Dragon" are painted on its side, along with a graphic. The image looks a bit like something out of a Chinese Dragon Boat Festival parade. As you may have guessed by now, Sea-lion is a Chinese company. The installation at Wash Cycle represents the first large project that Ed Kirejczyk, president of the group's U.S. subsidiary, has completed in the U.S. Sea-lion America, based in Westbrook, CT, debuted at the 2019 Clean Show. Sea-lion is a major global manufacturer of laundry systems, but getting established in the U.S. wasn't easy. As a newcomer, they faced fierce competition from both American and European manufacturers. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this challenge.

Kirejczyk says he's delighted to have supplied Wash Cycle with an array of wash aisle and finishing equipment. Lowrey returned the compliments, saying the systems have performed well and that—just as importantly—parts and service are readily available. "There was some risk," Lowrey says. "Because it was not a known name here in the United States." He adds that Sea-lion's support during the installation was excellent. Service issues—while rare—haven't posed a problem either, despite a 12-hour time difference between Lynn and Sea-lion's headquarters in Jiangsu, China. "When we have any issues, if we call them at 1 in the

afternoon our time, which is 1 a.m., there, within a half hour we have one of the engineers.”

All the equipment was humming as Lowrey led our midmorning tour. The plant’s new tunnel has 13, 135 lb. (60 kg.) modules. We watched as an employee dropped handfuls of sheets onto a conveyor that led to the mouth of the tunnel. Wash chemistry for this system, as well as the conventional wash aisle, is provided by Renegade Brands. Founded in 2012, this company—like Wash Cycle—is a relative newcomer to the industry. After washing, “cakes” of goods from the tunnel emerge from a 50 bar, variable-step press. These items next move to a conveyor that transports them to any of five, 275 lb. (124 kg.) pass-through, gas-heated dryers. The dryers are designed to process two cakes per load for improved efficiency and throughput. The shuttle and dryers are surrounded by safety fencing that prevents unauthorized access to moving machinery. On the backside of the dryers, goods drop onto a conveyor and then move to carts for finishing.

The plant’s conventional wash aisle includes several more Sea-lion washer/extractors. These are used for mats, dust-control items such as mop heads, stain-rewash goods and small lots, which are kept separated by customer. Equipment here includes three steam-heated washer/extractors. Among these are a 220 lb. (100 kg.) machine with an automated tilt mechanism to assist with loading/unloading. We also saw a 110 lb. (50 kg.) and a 55 lb. (25 kg.) washer/extractor. As for pony dryers, we saw a 55 lb., 110 lb. and a 220 lb. dryers, all heated with natural gas.

Near the end of the line of dryers that process goods from the tunnel, we saw a large lint-collection tower from Sea-lion. While the plant was extremely busy when we visited, we saw little if any lint on surfaces. The plant also has two Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems from Sea-lion. This high-tech equipment—powered by artificial intelligence and

“internet of things” technology—provides up to 100 wash system programs and complete system monitoring, including remote access and diagnostics. Wash Cycle currently processes roughly 60,000 lbs. (27,215 kg.) per day with a staff of 100 people working two shifts, seven days a week.

In one area of the wash floor, we saw a Norchem Corp. wastewater-treatment

system. While Wash Cycle’s throughput is virtually all light soil, compliance with local sewer-discharge rules and saving water are high priorities for the company. For example, the tunnel and water-treatment systems facilitate reuse of roughly 40% of the water used for processing. The plant’s overall water use is roughly .5 gallons per lb.



“THESE WORKHORSES HANDLE OUR EXPANDING WORKLOAD.”

Houston-based Triple D Uniform & Linen Service is benefiting from rapid growth in Texas. After processing 5.4 million pounds of linen in 2021, they anticipate delivering about 7.8 million by the end of 2023. They bought a new LX460 washer extractor (600 pound capacity) to join two older LX445s (450 pound capacity). All three are front-loading and user-friendly. “We chose LAVATEC for cost effectiveness and reliability,” Jacy Henderson, Triple D’s Vice President, says. “Our customers know we take care of business, and LAVATEC gets our needs taken care of.”

Ours is a long running story: To learn more about the LX-Series Washer Extractors, visit lvtusa.com or call 203.632.8777. See the full case study about Triple D at our website.

LAVATEC
Laundry Technology Inc.

Stepping into the mechanical room, we saw more evidence of the company's emphasis on compliance and conservation. Here there are two 50 HP boilers that require less energy than conventional large boilers and power up or down as needed to meet the plant's demand for steam for washing and finishing textiles.

Moving to the finishing side, we note that the plant uses negative air flow to continuously recirculate air from the clean to the soil side, thereby reducing any risk of cross-contamination of clean linen.

Our next stop is the finishing area. Here we see dueling vendors—Sea-lion and Lapauw—running parallel systems centered on two ironer lines.

On the left is the Sea-lion equipment. On the front end of the ironer line, we see a four-station spreader feeder. Next is a large 6-roll ironer that moves textiles through the equipment in a serpentine fashion with conveyor belts rather than with rolls and a chest. This process gives operators a better finish on their flatwork goods as both sides of the linens are ironed, Kirejczyk says. On the back end of the ironer, we see a high-speed folder with stacker, a blanket folder and an "intelligent" towel folder that folds towels of varying sizes.

The Lapauw equipment, including its large-role ironer for small pieces, is located on the right side of the finishing area. We watched as two employees hand fed tabletops into the ironer. Other equipment includes towel folders and several small-piece folders.

Employees inspect finished goods on the back side of the finishing-area equipment. They then place stacks of goods in carts—by customer—for movement to various hotels for use in guest rooms, swimming pools, spas and other hospitality facilities. Lastly, a team of six route service representatives make bulk deliveries of goods to each of Wash Cycle's hotel customers and

other hospitality venues across metropolitan Boston.

PARTNERING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Wash Cycle's Lynn plant has experienced dramatic growth in the months since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike some competitors, labor shortages have had a minimal impact on its operations, Mandujano says. "We have no issues with that," he answers when we ask about recruitment/retention, either in production or management jobs. That view contrasts sharply with other operators we've recently visited. Mandujano adds that initially, job fairs helped Wash Cycle get the word out, and they have helped maintain a steady flow of applicants as the Lynn operation has expanded. "This community here has been really great," he adds. "We've got partnerships with a lot of local organizations that help send candidates."

The company's emphasis on people, including its "clean slate" policy for people in need of new career options, may have helped as well. However, the company's location in close proximity to nearby prospects strikes us as a contributor to Wash Cycle's ample labor supply. "Most of our employees actually live in Lynn," Mandujano says. "It's commutable." Roughly 60% of staff either walk to work or take buses, he adds. That's gives Wash Cycle an advantage over plants located in industrial parks whose employees typically drive to work.

Another plus for staff longevity could stem from Lowrey and Mandujano's emphasis on incident prevention. They hired a consultant to guide the program, write policies and assist with training. State officials offer input as well as part of a "proactive" effort to avoid accidents, "As with many things in safety, it's like multiple layers," Mandujano says. "So we also work with state inspectors. Every year, we have a voluntary state health and safety


inspection. They give us a comprehensive run down, and they've requested certain changes. But it's better to be proactive." The plant also has a safety committee that includes both hourly and management staff. They meet monthly or as needed to address safety concerns.

To some extent, Wash Cycle positioned itself at the right place at the right time as the region emerged from COVID shutdowns. In the competitive metro-Boston market, hotels coming out of the pandemic gave the company a look as guests began streaming back to the area for leisure and business travel, including conferences that have fueled banquet business for Wash Cycle, Mandujano says.

Bottom line? Mandujano and its lead equipment vendor, Sea-lion, have in a sense teamed up for growth. If the equipment continues to perform as expected, Wash Cycle will be well positioned to fulfill its mission of "Clean Laundry, Clean Planet, Clean Slates" in the Boston area. In that scenario, Sea-lion too will benefit with its first installation that the company can spotlight to U.S. prospects.

Displayed on a wall near the entrance to Wash Cycle is an ornate wood and glass-enclosed box. Sea-lion executives gave this to Mandujano last year as a gift to congratulate him on the newly completed plant. Inside is a gold *ruyi*, an ancient Chinese symbol of good luck. Inscribed on the outside of the box are the words "May your business prosper in the years to come," along with the equipment maker's slogan, "Together we create a clean world."

For Wash Cycle the goal is to advance both objectives by expanding its base of area hotel customers as a reliable supplier of clean linens. **TS**

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