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Ensuring Quality:

Operators Talk Tactics, Strategies

Ideas for enhancing excellence in textile processing

By Jack Morgan

Achieving high quality standards in the linen, uniform and facility services industry takes proactive customer service, top-flight equipment/systems and a “quality mindset” that’s communicated to every employee—especially route service representatives or anyone who works directly with customers. That was the consensus view among several veteran operators that we recently interviewed.

Consider, for example, Paul Jewison. He wears two hats as general manager of Textile Care Services, Rochester, MN, a large healthcare and hospitality launderer that services high-profile clients, including the Mayo Clinic. He’s also a vice president of TCS’s parent company, Healthcare Linen Services Group, St. Charles, IL. For Jewison, quality—however you pursue it—is the ultimate differentiator because it’s instantly visible to customers. “People see our quality,” says Jewison, who recently oversaw a \$10 million wash-aisle upgrade at the 96,000-square-foot (8,918-square-meter) Rochester plant. “They know it. We have that reputation for the best quality. There’s no doubt we sign

and re-sign contracts that competitively, maybe we didn't come in with the lowest bid." The reason is TCS's quality won out over competitors, he says. As the old saying goes, you get what you pay for. That hasn't changed. But the strategies and tactics that operators pursue to realize their vision of quality varies widely. What's more, it's evolving as technology advances.

Trust but Inspect

For Chris Welch, president of Prudential Overall Supply, Irvine, CA, an industrial operator with a national footprint, his company's drive to achieve ISO certification at each of its 37 locations is a keystone for ensuring quality processing of garments, mats and other reusable products. "Achieving ISO certification at every location has been a significant step in driving a quality mindset within the business," Welch says. "Being able to drill down with specific product quality standards, process work instructions and auditing procedures is helping us improve the delivered quality of the products our customers receive. It also blends nicely with our kaizen (i.e., continuous improvement) efforts and methodology."

Other companies apply their own set of ISO-type standards without the formality of certifying their quality goals. For Tammie Hood, VP of operations for United Hospitality Services, Austell, GA, key steps for ensuring quality production include:

- **Inspection and Receiving Audit:** Textiles are inspected for damage, stains, or wear before processing.
- **Sorting and Classification:** Items are sorted by type, fabric, color and soil level to ensure appropriate cleaning.
- **Standardized Washing Processes:** The use of precise formulas for detergent, water temperature and cycle duration specific to textile types.
- **Advanced Machinery:** Automated systems monitor and control washing, drying and pressing for consistency.
- **Post-Processing Inspection:** Items are checked for cleanliness, damage, or missing components prior to packaging and delivery.
- **Packaging and Labeling:** Ensuring that items are correctly packaged and labeled to avoid mix-ups or shortages.

Another company, Topper Linen and Uniform Service, Toronto, also embraces a systematic approach

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“ The most important thing about quality is from the CSR dealing with the customer...If for any reason, the customer isn’t satisfied, the company has to take steps to address the issue promptly and effectively. ”

to processing. For example, their staff inspect goods on the feeding and folding sides of the process to ensure quality. But President and CEO Tim Topornicki emphasizes the key role that customer service reps (CSRs) play as the front-line link to customers. “The most important thing about quality is from the CSR dealing with the customer,” he says. If for any reason, the customer isn’t satisfied, the company has to take steps to address the issue promptly and effectively, Topornicki says. For Topper Linen, if an item such as a napkin is stained or damaged, a new one is sent. “We train and stick to an offer of an immediate replacement,” says Topornicki. “Not a credit, but a replacement.” In such cases, a memo is written to document the customer’s concern, and a manager from the company’s administrative department will follow up to make sure the customer’s issue was resolved.

Having a systematic approach to customer service is especially important with new clients, says Topornicki whose 60,000-square-foot (5,574-square-meter) plant is processing nearly 200,000 lbs. per week. “When you get a new account, their expectations are very high,” he says. “So you must exceed their expectations and the first 90-120 days and be on your toes at all times. If they’re dissatisfied, let’s deal with it right away. On the garment side, it’s the same way.” Many operators encourage customers to check for defects in uniforms, such as missing buttons. The wearer or his or her manager can fill out a card asking the CSR to provide a replacement.

Topornicki emphasizes catching these problems in-house first. “At the same time we should be checking on the production side for staining or repairs to items that look like they’re not good. But they must follow the same process. If the customer is not happy, we do a complete investigation of that account’s garments from top to bottom over a three-week period.”

Jewison, who’s plant is processing roughly 660,000 lbs. (299,370 kg.) per week, takes a similarly proactive approach by looking at samples, say 20 sheets a time to inspect for stains or damage. “I can’t really see any other way,” he says. “You just you have to go down and pull it right off the line all the time.”

No matter how sophisticated systems get, there’s still a possibility of errors. Hand checking goods *before* they go out can help head off problems. “You’ve got to be constantly pulling,” he says, referring to hand inspections. “You never know when a chemical line is going to get plugged or something’s going to go wrong with the wash formula or something else.”

Tech: Impacts & Priorities

While machinery and systems—like anything devised by people—are not perfect, Welch notes that in his company’s experience, as technology advances, it’s providing an important supplement to staff-based quality checks. “The accuracy of equipment operation and improving technologies in wash floor chemistry have a significant impact,” he

says. “It’s exciting to see various suppliers build-in additional quality mechanisms to the equipment they design, elevating and buttressing the required human element.”

For Hood, advances in automation are also making a difference for her plant that’s processing roughly 450,000 lbs. (204,116 kg.) per week. Examples include radio frequency identification (RFID) technology that tracks items throughout the cleaning process, thereby “reducing losses and mix-ups,” she says. For other companies, tracking via barcodes remains an effective if less-efficient alternative that offers a more affordable option.

These include Topper Linen, which underwent a multi-million-dollar reconstruction effort following a disastrous fire in 2017. RFID technology is an investment for the future, but not now, Topornicki says. Restaurant customers in metro Toronto still haven’t fully recovered from the COVID-19 shutdowns, he says. Some succumbed to the “culling” of COVID and are no longer in business. For Topper Linen, this tight market means some investments must remain on hold for now. “We do see a great advantage to RFID because it speeds the processing of product,” Topornicki says. “In our particular case, our garment system is overwhelmed right now, so it is something that needs attention. Yes, we need an upgrade. But like many things in our industry, there’s only so many shekels in the drawer.”

Jewison sees value in RFID too, as well as scanning systems for ironers that automatically detect stains and tears within parameters set by the launderer. But in TCS’s case, they decided to forgo these upgrades—for now at least—in favor of other improvements. “We would love to be able to have the scanners that they have on the sheets and such,” Jewison says. “But we don’t. It’s expensive. Although I think it’s come down in price. You know, we would



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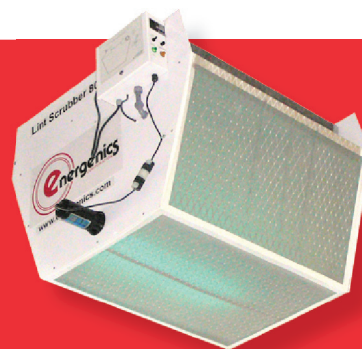
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“ We contact a majority of our customers twice a year and ask specifically that they rate the quality of the goods and services provided...It’s impossible to respond to the marketplace if you aren’t listening to it. ”

love to have it. If I was to build a new plant, I definitely would try to put it out (for bid).”

While certain priorities may lack the “wow” factor of RFID systems or flatwork scanners, they’re nonetheless essential. For example, the TCS upgrade included a \$1 million roof-replacement project in the plant build in 1993. “We had to pick our priorities,” Jewison says. “We put on a new roof. We could have spent some of that on technology, but now as you see the plant, we’re at a point where we can move the ball downfield.” (see related article, pg. 34, October 2024 *Textile Services*).

Feedback & Fundamentals

While all the company leaders we contacted said they see value in advanced technology and systematic quality-control procedures, they also never assume customers are happy with the overall service. You can’t know that without asking questions, either in person or online or by using other survey methods. Few companies in the linen, uniform and textile services industry approach the need for customer feedback more proactively than Prudential. Company Chair Dan Clark devotes a good portion of his time visiting customers personally and querying them on his company’s service and quality. “We contact a majority of our customers twice a year and ask specifically that they rate the quality of the goods and services provided,” Welch says. “We use that formal feedback, along

with call-ins and other ‘listening posts’ to drive our efforts in creating solutions for problems we sometimes may not even know we have. It’s impossible to respond to the marketplace if you aren’t listening to it.”

Hood says UHS uses an array of tools to gather customer input. These include:

- **Customer Surveys:** Periodic surveys to collect structured feedback.
- **Sales and Service Teams:** Frontline employees ask informal questions during routine interactions.
- **Digital Feedback Channels:** Email forms, mobile apps, or dedicated portals for customer input.
- **Post-Service Follow-Ups:** Follow-up emails or calls after a service event to gather immediate reactions.
- **Focus Groups:** Periodic discussions with key clients for in-depth feedback.

For TCS, regularly gathering information from customers is an ongoing part of the service process. “The way we approach it is we document everything,” Jewison says. “We get feedback from our customer service reps. That’s the main component.” He adds that regular communication with customers will uncover problems, but TCS’s focus on quality

keeps the number of complaints at a low level. “A lot of places send out extra cards for returns,” he says. “We really don’t do that. I mean, we don’t get returns.” He adds that the company’s ability to thrive hinges on quality, and TCS’s culture emphasizes getting things right the first time to avoid costly exchanges of goods.

Topper Linen takes a similar tack, Topornicki says. If a customer complains about an order, full documentation of the issue ensues. Supervisors will step in quickly if the CSR needs back up to make sure the issue is resolved to the customer’s satisfaction. This close monitoring is especially important for Topper Linen because many of the route staff aren’t native speakers of English. To help minimize miscommunication, they use e-mail or texts to send simple messages to back to the office so that everyone can understand. Topornicki’s strictest rule for CSRs is that if a customer has an issue that the CSR can’t fix on this own, he or she must relay the information back to the plant to make sure it’s resolved successfully. “It’s great to talk about quality,” Topornicki says, “But when your CSR is facing the customer and you shrug your shoulders and say, ‘I don’t know. Call the office.’ That means that you should consider another career somewhere else. It’s not what you were trained for. You’ve been trained to say, ‘Mr. Smith, I’m not sure how to get the answer you want right now. But let me let me go to my truck and make a phone call.’” Then they can return to the customer and say that someone from the office will get in touch shortly to fix the problem. For some customers, emails may work better.”

In Toronto, a highly diverse community, many employees working CSR jobs for Topper Linen are either immigrants or first-generation Canadians with limited English, Topornicki says. “For most of our workforce, English is not their first language.

It's very important that it's written down."

One upside of this situation is that the recent influx of Ukrainian immigrants to Canada since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has alleviated the labor shortages that plagued the area during the pandemic, says Topornicki, whose grandparents emigrated from Ukraine in the early 20th century. Topornicki speaks basic-level Ukrainian, but he was fortunate to hire a Ukrainian immigrant who studied English and can communicate with Ukrainian-native CSRs as well as with English-speaking staff. "We have a woman in our admin office," he says. "She is from Ukraine, but studied English in Ukraine. So now we've made it simple for our CSRs and anybody just to write down what they think the concern is. And then take a picture of it, or they can call her if they wish." This gives CSRs a clear channel to explain the customer's concern and get guidance from management on how to fix it, he says. That way, a CSR can't use a lack of communications skills as an excuse to "just shrug their shoulders and walk away."

For Jewison, emphasizing quality is a continuous process of training staff at all levels. "It's just a mindset," he says. Particularly in an era of high turnover, laundry operators can't rely on "institutional memory" to ensure that everyone knows—and follows—quality procedures. "You've got to keep it in the forefront of your daily work," he says. "I think people teach other people that that's not

acceptable. That's kind of the core of our business, and the people that have been here a long time, kind of keep the ship steered straight. Because every minute of every day you can send out great quality all day long. Then the night shift in the last hour can just throw a bunch of incontinence pads through, and they're looking sloppy. So there's multiple checkpoints...when you fold it and then when it gets packed into the cart. I think that we follow the process on quality."

Why Quality Matters

Each of the operators we contacted agreed that quality is critical to recruiting and retaining customers. This is hardly in dispute, although some operators—for whatever reason—don't follow through on quality commitments. Ensuring consistent quality takes effort and investment in training, technology, plus awareness, ranging from the CEO to entry-level finishing department staff. But for those operators who accept this challenge, the ROI often includes business with high-value customers. When we asked Welch if quality serves as a competitive differentiator for Prudential, he answers, "For the right customers, yes. The customers that we most desire are those that understand total value vs. simple price."

Hood adds that demonstrating quality sends a compelling message to prospects. For established customers, a commitment to quality processing helps keep them satisfied, thus fueling a kind of virtuous

circle. "Fewer shortages and higher quality mean clients spend less on replacements and emergency stock, adding value to the service," she says, noting that there's a sustainability factor that also appeals to many customers. "High-quality cleaning extends the life of textiles, supporting clients' sustainability goals and aligning with eco-conscious trends." As for retention, Hood notes that, "Prospective clients often prioritize suppliers with proven track records of no shortages or damages because it simplifies their operations." What's more, those operators with advanced technology can tout that fact when querying prospects. "Offering tailored quality-control measures (like RFID tracking to prevent shortages) can make a laundry service more attractive than its competitors," she says.

When asked if quality is a differentiator, Topornicki answers, "Absolutely," noting that companies have relocated and requested that Topper Linen continue as their textile services provider. He says they told him, "We want you. You paid attention to our needs. When we had a problem or an issue, your team dealt with it very efficiently."

Bottom line? Ensuring quality takes an all-hands-on-deck effort, with service, equipment, training and leadership that makes customers' needs and expectations a top priority. **TS**



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