



Miller Mats: 'A Business Built on Trust'

Pittsburgh independent thrives on 'handshake agreements' backed by reliable, quality service.

By Jack Morgan

Above: Clean, rolled mats are stored on numbered shelves for movement to the routes.

You don't have to be the biggest to be the best, says Mark Miller, owner/operator of Miller Mats. His Pittsburgh-based mat-processing company is marking its 30th anniversary this year with a customer list that includes sports stadiums, universities, hospitals... even a nuclear equipment plant. What's his secret? Bonds of trust between the company and its clients, and the commitment of Miller and his 11-member team to provide them with quality service.

"This is a business built on trust," Miller says. "Plain and simple. We have no contracts with our customers," noting that all business is conducted on a "handshake" basis.

Armed with its catchphrase "Step on it," Miller Mats has won a loyal following from scores of clients within a 60-mile radius of downtown Pittsburgh. "They trust us to be reliable; to be safe," he says. "They know we're going to come into their

building, be highly sensitive...may-be drug-rehab clinics, hospitals, children's hospitals and so forth, nuclear sites. We're going to come in there, do the work, act responsibly and be safe. We've probably delivered over a million mats in the time we've been in business. You're talking millions of people walking over our mats."

In that time, the company has had two slip-and-fall claims. Both were settled quickly through insurance. Miller Mats has never had a workers' compensation claim, Miller says.

Now 72, Miller is seeking an operations manager who may one day succeed him. Miller's son and three daughters have outside career interests. No other family members are interested in joining the business. He plans to find an outside leader and "Train them from scratch, teach them the culture, to understand the business, to understand the uniqueness of Miller Mats," he says, adding that, "This whole idea of trust, of building a family-type operation, a culture of people that want to be the best. I always wanted to be the best at something. Was it going to be mats? No. But here I am. And we are the best."

Entrepreneurial Emergence

Miller, like many entrepreneurs we've met in the linen, uniform and facility services industry, came to the laundry business by happenstance. Born in Guatemala, he was the son of a U.S. foreign service officer. He grew up mainly in York, PA, and was a fun-loving student. Miller likened his educational experience to that of the eponymous lead character in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. His antics got him expelled from York Suburban High School. "I was a good student," Miller says. "I was on the student council, varsity swimming team, the band and so forth. But I thought having a good time was part of the curriculum. Right? They didn't

seem to agree. Anyway, I got thrown out." Miller transferred to the more socio-economically and ethnically diverse William Penn High School. There, he encountered a rigorous curriculum and instructors with Ivy League credentials teaching advanced placement (AP) classes.

Having had problems in school, Miller can relate to the fact that many of his prospective

employees—including formerly incarcerated individuals—have faced their own misfortunes. He encourages them to think of his company as a place to start fresh. "They basically have found a home here, and that performance in *this job* is what counts," he says. "And what you did in the past, I don't care."

Miller reached a turning point early in his career as a newspaper

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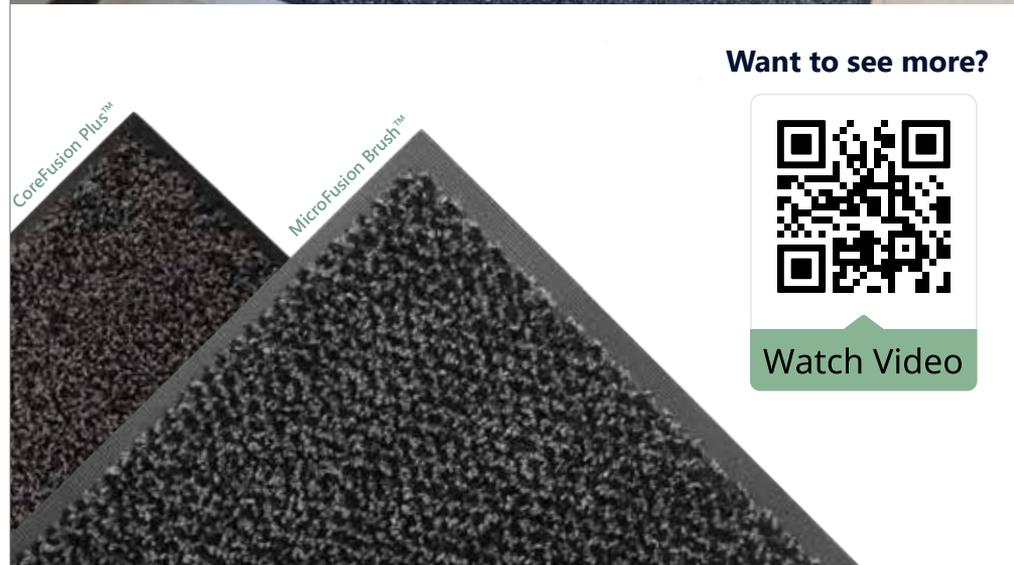
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Above: (from top) An employee works on one of the plant's two washer/extractors; a second washer located next to the first; a mat roller used to prepare mats for packout.

reporter for the *Easton (PA) Express*. He'd earned acclaim covering organized crime issues in neighboring New Jersey. But he gained real prominence in 1976 with a series of articles on a member of the first group of 119 female cadets at the U.S. Military Academy. The woman was from the newspaper's circulation area. "She was only there about three months, and then mysteriously resigned," Miller says. "So I called her up, and I was going to find out what happened. There was substantial evidence that it was sexual harassment." The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* picked up on this story. Miller had prepared a follow-up piece that the editor wanted to publish next. However, Miller refused to divulge information he received on an off-the-record basis. This led to his dismissal.

At the time, Miller was 24, married, with one child and another on the way. He took a job as a forklift driver. In search of a better opportunity, he hired on with a rust-proofing company. They fired him when a customer complained. "I damaged some guy's Cadillac," Miller says. After that, he pounded the pavement looking for jobs. Then he was hired by Coyne Industrial Laundries (later known as Coyne Textile Services [CTS]).

He started as a "route jumper" for CTS, filling in for regular drivers who were out sick or on vacation. In the pre-GPS days, Miller relied on index cards smeared with pencil marks. He enjoyed working a route, and eventually he advanced to a sales rep post. In this job, he nearly got fired a few days before Thanksgiving for falling short of his sales goals. Miller recalls his boss saying, "Unless you start making your quota, you're going to be the Thanksgiving turkey." After receiving this dose of "tough love," Miller knuckled down and determined to do better. "I just went home and told my wife, 'You're not going to see me for a while.' So I just worked."

Before long, Miller rose to the position of top salesman—not just for the York plant, but all 22 CTS operations at that time (Cintas Corp. and Prudential Overall Supply bought Coyne in 2015). Miller says he worked with a team that pioneered the sale of restroom supplies in the early 1980s. Around that time, Miller flew in CTS owner Tommy Coyne’s private jet to the Cleveland plant to discuss Miller’s heading up operations there. He gladly accepted the job, though there were some challenges, including high crime and labor issues. “The first week I was there, they jumped the fence and stole the batteries out of all the trucks,” Miller says. “We had two guard dogs, but they stole the guard dogs. It was a rough neighborhood.”

Despite these headaches, Miller grew CTS’s business at a brisk pace. He was recruited away by crosstown rival Aramark (renamed Vestis on Sept. 30, 2023) as a sales rep for its Cleveland operation. Miller moved up in sales and was named district manager. Three years into that job, the president of Aramark offered Miller a chance to open a new operation in Pittsburgh. Miller was excited at this prospect. “I’m like, OK. So my dad always encouraged me to go out on my own. So I’m thinking, ‘This would be good practice.’ And so I came here and opened up a little office. For four years, I did it here; we put on 11 routes.”

Miller had already worked briefly in Pittsburgh for Coyne. From the moment he stepped onto Liberty Avenue in the “Strip,” an area dominated by food and other wholesale warehouses, he fell for the “Steel City.” From the early ‘90s on, Miller adopted Pittsburgh as his new home. After growing the Aramark business for four years, he set out on his own in 1996.

We saw what Miller has done with his mat-specialty business during a walk-through of the facility.

“ Miller cites this [mat customization] service and his company’s willingness to offer an array of mat sizes as a key competitive advantage in the Pittsburgh market. ”

In The Plant

Based on the foregoing description, one might identify Miller Mats as a “boutique” operator. While that’s a fair assessment, the term “boutique” doesn’t spring to mind when you step into the company’s 11,000-square-foot (1,021-square-meter) plant. It’s clean and well organized, but not flashy. Soiled mats from the company’s five routes spanning metropolitan Pittsburgh arrive in carts at a rear entrance. Staff roll them into the wash aisle for processing. We watched as an employee loaded soiled mats into one of two 450 lb. (204 kg.) washers. One machine is from **Brim Laundry Machinery Co.**; the other is an L-TRON washer/extractor from **JENSEN**. The plant’s throughput includes roughly 2,500 mats per week. **Gurtler Industries Inc.** provides wash chemistry. We watched an employee pour a cup of powdered detergent into a washer/extractor.

Laundering mats comprises about 95% of the plant’s volume. The remainder is mainly bar towels, most of which are outsourced to Allegheny Textiles, a laundry located about a half-hour drive from Miller Mats. The towel business is a service that the company offers to its customers, Miller says. The plant isn’t engineered flatwork, though it does have a couple of pony washers and dryers for small lots, including some microfiber towels that it processes on-site. Restaurant bar mops are a product that Miller and his team prefer not to handle directly because of the food waste and insects that sometimes

accompany soiled goods. “Our guys aren’t used to that,” Miller says. “We don’t want it. So I talked to Allegheny Textiles, I said, ‘Do you want this stuff?’ They said, ‘Yeah, we’re good with that.’” As a symbol of the company’s mat-centric focus, one wall in the plant bears a print of Edvard Munch’s “The Scream,” with a thought bubble above the main figure that reads, “We’re out of towels!”

After washing, staff loads the goods into a 400 lb. (181 kg.) dryer from **JENSEN Braun**. Staff sometimes roll these by hand, or they use a mat roller. Nearby are a small boiler, a hot-water storage tank, an air compressor and a water-softening tank.

Stepping into a hallway, we enter an area where staff pursue one of the services that differentiates Miller Mats from rival laundries: the mat-customization department. Miller cites this service and his company’s willingness to offer an array of mat sizes as a key competitive advantage in the Pittsburgh market. “They have maybe 15, 20 SKUs (stock-keeping units),” Miller says of his competitors’ mat offerings. “We have about 140. So we have a 3×2, 3×3, 3×4, 3×5, 3×6, 3×7, 3×8, 3×9, 3×10, 3×12, 3×15. So we can fit all these.” If that’s not enough, Miller Mats will trim mats to order. “We do a lot of custom work,” he says, noting that **M&A Matting** is the company’s main supplier. “We do custom shapes.” One job included customizing a mat to fit a revolving door. “We can do up to 60 square feet, which is a 5×12 or a 4×15 for rental service.” Miller won’t go any larger because it’s too hard on the



Above: (from top) Miller loads mats; a custom-made mat. Crew camaraderie: (l/r) Adam Haynes, production & route service; Terence Yelverton, production manager; Derek Francis (arm raised) production & route service; Charles Washington, route service & company chef; Mark Gray, route service; and John Webb Jr., production.

employees, he says. "It's very physical work. And you're doing mats all day long. I had back issues when I first started. So I developed a system that has worked very well in terms of—knock on wood—we haven't had any workers' comp issues at all."

Finished rolled mats and logo mats are placed in numbered shelves for movement to the routes. The plant uses cargo vans, rather than the more familiar box trucks. Miller says he prefers the vans because they're easier to load/unload. This reduces the risk of back injuries, a lesson he learned at Aramark. "When I was up in Cleveland with Aratex (a predecessor name for Aramark), at the time, guys were having problems walking up into the step vans, carrying mats and whatnot," Miller says. "They were having problems with their knees and their backs and all that." The cargo vans are easier for moving mats, Miller says. The company also uses light-weight hand trucks to avoid hauling mats by hand. After the tour, we learned more about the safety program.

Service Commitment

The Miller Mats team trains new employees to prevent incidents, particularly those involving mat handling. "We show the guys when they first start what to do; what not to do," Plant Manager Terence Yelverton says. "Basically, how to lift. When you're pulling the mats out of the washer, don't struggle. There are 50 mats in there. Find the loose one; pull that one out. Then find the next loose one. Pull that one out. Don't be yanking on them, because then you're going to hurt yourself, OK. And when they pull them out of the washer, they lay them flat on that cart. So they can easily throw them into the dryer one at a time."

As for route vehicles, Miller trusts his people. But if he suspects a problem, he can verify that they're complying with company policies, such as off-route travel and cell-phone

use. "I have a tracking device, and I used it one time when I suspected a driver was spending company time off the route," he says. "And sure enough, he was. I canned him. But we have a policy that the guys have to sign. There's no use of cell phones while driving." When asked if he's sure that other drivers aren't breaking the rules, Miller reiterates that the business is built on trust.

In 30 years, the company has had fewer than 10 minor accidents, several of which involved the individual cited above, who was terminated, Miller says. The trucks are branded with the company name, and the public isn't shy about calling if they see a route driver operating carelessly. In light of these issues, Miller doesn't use dash cameras to monitor the drivers' every move. "We don't have cameras in here to follow the guys around," he says. "The trucks have our name on them. If somebody cuts somebody off, yes, we'll get that now and then. And, obviously, we have a conversation. We counsel them. If there is a fender bender, we have a complete investigation and accident report."

Because the company's staff includes some ex-offenders, Miller personally handles deliveries for one client, a nuclear facility. "I'm the only guy here that can pass the drug test and the criminal-background test," he quips. "So I actually service the facility. It's a machine shop. They make zirconium rods for nuclear power plants. Our average count is five mats. The account I serve has 85 mats. So I go out and do it myself every other Tuesday." Miller doesn't mind. "I love it," he says. "Being on the route is the best thing ever. That's how I got into the business when I first started with Coyne in York. The supervisor took me out on the route. He said, 'This is what you're going to do. I'm like, 'Yeah, this is cool. Fresh air, exercise.'"

Miller Mats' service commitment speaks to how independents can

thrive in an era of consolidation. Miller says he gets business from larger rivals because they don't change out the mats regularly, whereas his staff does. Hospitals and other organizations that contract with publicly held laundries often ask for—and get—exemptions for mat services. Like the tech giants Google and Meta, Miller says the national companies are more focused on shareholders than customers.

Despite rising costs, Miller says he wants to continue. "We're at the point where the expense of the new equipment, a new building, that could be the end...If I decided it was going to be the end. But I see this as a valuable institution, and I want to keep our company going." **TS**



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