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Housekeeping Rags...Offering a New Approach

Eric L. Frederick, RLLD

Laundry and Textile Processing is a *service* industry with a great history. The evolution to ergonomically correct equipment, processes designed for efficient productivity and the advances in chemical effectiveness have all contributed to an improved product outcome.

However, the old adage, “If you always do... what you’ve always done..., then you’ll always get... what you always got” may demonstrate the approach we have taken in regards to housekeeping rags. Is this the approach we have taken when dealing with linen abuse? Laundry Managers continue to ragout textiles and give them to housekeeping services to use “in place of” the towels or linens that they originally were. What message does this send? Has this approach been effective? Has dyeing the textiles changed staff behavior and prevented the linen misuse? Perhaps a new approach is exactly what is needed. This article will explore a concept that could be a viable alternative.

It has been practice in this industry for years to supply the housekeeping department with terry products that no longer comply with facility standards. Typically these “rags” are dyed to differentiate them from the “good linen”. Often they are cut into smaller sizes and provided in bulk to housekeeping services. This seems to be the best solution; one that appears to meet the needs of the laundry manager by identifying a source for un-usable products. It is thought to meet the needs of housekeeping services by providing a dusting/cleaning product.

The goal for laundry services is to provide housekeeping with rags in an attempt to alleviate the miss-use of good wash cloths and towels as cleaning rags. This practice used by almost everyone in the country is to wash, dry and bulk return these rags.

First, the underlying assumption is that the housekeepers have the time to lay out and fold their own rags. There may have been a time when this was true but as with all aspects of the service industry everyone must now maximize their time. With 20+ years of budget cuts the housekeeping staff is stretched to the limit. Given a choice of using wash cloths that are neatly stacked and readily available on the linen carts or trying to find acceptable rags from the bulk delivery the wash cloths will win every time.

The second assumption is that cut up terry products make good cleaning cloths. Cut terry will lint excessively after the first wash. It is inconsistent in size and therefore not user friendly. And rags with holes in them are an inefficient substitute. The bulk rags that are used on a routine basis are wash cloths that were discarded due to stain / substandard appearance. They are a nice size, no torn edges, no holes and low linting.

Assumption number three is that a good solution to the rag problem is buying a cheap colored wash cloth and providing them as bulk rags. By doing this we are still placing the burden on the housekeepers to lay out their own rags. We are asking them to care about our linen replacement budget and invest their time and effort in helping us keep our costs down. This may work with a few of the housekeepers but most will follow the path of least resistance and get their stock of cleaning rags (wash cloths) from the usable stock wash cloths.

What message are we, the laundry manager, sending? We are telling the housekeeping staff that it is acceptable to use wash cloths as cleaning rags. We are teaching them that wash cloths make good rags and they are using them. Once they become accustomed to the feel, performance, and size of the wash cloth as a cleaning cloth nothing else will do.

How can the laundry manager meet the needs of the housekeeping departments we service? We must be sure we keep the goals of the laundry service in mind.

- Reduce the misuse of good linen as cleaning rags
- Reduce the amount of money spent on replacement bath towels and wash cloths
- Provide an additional source of revenue and poundage
- Provide a product that is more convenient to use than wash cloths
- Meet the customer's needs
- Better manage the inventory of cleaning cloths

To meet these goals we must change the way we look at this issue. We can no longer provide down-graded linen as rags. In fact we need to get the term "*cleaning rag*" out of our vocabulary and replace it with "*cleaning cloth*". A rag gets no respect while a cleaning cloth is something different; it is a tool with a purpose. The cleaning cloth should be a terry product that is used solely for cleaning. A perfect cleaning cloth would be about 14" x 14". Unfortunately textile manufacturers don't make a product of this size. One option that has worked in our instance is utilizing a stripped bar towel as a cleaning cloth.

MEET THE CUSTOMER'S NEEDS – Stack the *cleaning cloths* in groups of 20, tie them and ship to the customer's housekeeping department. We realized that in order to provide a convenient product, meet the customer's needs and better manage the inventory, we had to fold the towels. Our goal is to ensure that there is a proper supply of cleaning cloths for each housekeeper everyday. In our operation, we use an orange stripped bar towel to keep them separate from the regular bar towels supplied to dietary. We also make sure that the two types of bar towels are never washed together.

ADDITIONAL SOURCE OF REVENUE – The cleaning cloths are priced per piece less than that of a wash cloth. This provides financial incentive for the facility to make sure that the cleaning cloths are used instead of a wash cloth. Ragged-out terry is sold on the rag market for a premium price. But if you work this program right, your poundage of ragged out linens will significantly decrease as linen misuse decreases.

REDUCE THE MISUSE AND MONEY SPENT ON REPLACEMENTS – Communication with housekeeping management, continued education and innovative approaches such as this continue to provide alternatives to the age old problem of linen misuse. The key is to provide the customer with a cost-effective alternative that is as easy for them to use and provides adequate service.

Eric Frederick, RLLD is the Director of Linen Services for Carilion Laundry Services in Roanoke, Virginia; a commercial laundry operation serving both healthcare and hospitality markets. Mr. Frederick served NAILM as President from 1999 through 2004 and currently serves as a Director on the ALM Board.