

Keys to Success

By Esther Marr

Learning how to efficiently manage linen within the hospitality industry takes repeated practice and constant education. With persistence and dedication to always discovering new and effective methods to control this vital aspect of the industry, however, operators will be rewarded with satisfied customers, as well as content employees.

Finding an adequate PAR level

One of the main factors in effective hospitality linen management is having an adequate per-available-room (PAR) level. While management and/or operators may feel that using short PAR levels will ultimately save money, the impact can be very negative.

Linen is a major capital investment for hospitality operations, considering the cost to add one additional PAR can range from \$200 to \$600 per room.

“Most operators know their property works better with three to four PAR of linen in the system, but capital budgets often have a reality you have to deal with,” explained David Chadsey, a consultant to laundry owners and directors who specializes in hospitality efficiencies.

With this factor in mind, it may be difficult for property operators to avoid short PAR levels and still operate at a high efficiency to accommodate guests.

One of the key factors in accomplishing this feat, however, is budgeting correctly and refusing to use linen-dedicated funds for other property needs. “A regular monthly order can help keep budgeted dollars allocated to linen purchases,” said Chadsey.

The other major way to keep adequate PAR levels is simple: make sure the hospitality staff is taking care of the linens. Poor management and treatment of linens can be a significant contributor to linen loss.

Ensuring the procedures in housekeeping and laundry do not damage a property’s resources includes monitoring the amount of bleach used in the wash process.

“High bleach concentrations are a very inexpensive way to provide bright linen,” said Chadsey. “Especially in chemical contracts that provide a guaranteed cost per pound, bleach can flow a little heavier than it should. Heavy bleaching in the wash, however, is a very short-term gain, as bleach residuals will cause excessive wear of product and increased replacement costs.”

Another important factor in linen management is choosing a quality of linens that is in line with a particular property’s market. Thread counts, duvets, and towel weights are all major factors for hotel operators to consider.

“Like most things, better costs more,” said Chadsey. “Operators need to identify their market and then meet or exceed their market client’s expectations in the area of linen.”



Over the years, better quality, heavier weighted linens have been incorporated into high-end hotels. But overall, the extra weight has not added to a net increase in linen being washed due to the desire of guests and operators to be more sustainable. Many hotel operators wash only the towels that have been used and change the bed linens only upon request of the guest.

“The pounds of linen per occupied room are surprisingly consistent with what they were 10 years ago,” said Andrew Everts, field training manager for healthcare and hospitality for Ecolab. “It can be anywhere from eight to 35 pounds per occupied room.”

The biggest issue operators do face, however, is finding technology that helps control costs. Systems such as ozone generation and water reclamation offer the operator respective cost savings in energy and water usage, but the down side is that the initial investment can range from \$5,000 to \$350,000 before any savings is realized.

“Ultimately, the best advice for a laundry operator is to seek out trained professionals in the field and solicit their advice,” said Everts. “This can be the chemical supplier, machine manufacturer representative, or the distributor. Often these individuals have many years of experience helping their customers solve problems and reducing total operating costs.”

Machine options

There are three main types of washing machines currently used in the hospitality industry to ensure optimum efficiency in linen management: open pocket, split pocket, and tunnels.

Open pocket machines are most common in smaller applications, although the models are available in 400 and 600-pound capacities. Most 250-room properties processing their own linen have an assortment of open pockets in their wash aisle.

Split pocket washers provide larger conventional wash capacities at significantly less cost per machine. The down side, however, is that split pockets can require additional labor to load and unload.

“There are supporting systems to improve split pocket production, but overall they are a little slower,” said Chadsey.

Tunnel washers provide the most efficient way to process large quantities of light and medium soil loads. These machines use less than half the amount of water as a conventional washer.

“With less water use also comes less energy use, as less water has to be heated,” Chadsey explained. “In larger (more than 2,000 pounds per hour) applications, tunnels also require less labor to operate.”

The drawback of using tunnels, however, is they require professional support since they must have a steady flow of goods into them to maintain efficiency.



“Especially in mid-sized transition properties, there is a lot to learn about managing the tunnel system,” said Chadsey. “And of course when you have four washers and one goes down, the staff works a little longer to get the laundry done.”

One of the easiest ways to control labor costs while using washer-extractors is to choose machines with larger capacities since the larger the washer, the less handling is involved in loading and unloading.

“Also the larger the washer usually the less resources such as water and electricity is used measured pound-for-pound,” said Everts. “But if the washer is not filled to capacity or some lightly soiled linen is washed with heavily soiled linen, then the operator has wasted water, energy, and chemistry.”

For the last reason mentioned, Evert said every property should additionally have a smaller washer that can handle loads of rags or special linens that cannot wait for the laundry operator to acquire enough linen to fill a larger load.

Benefits of automatic turn-off dryers

In most cases, industry professionals agree the benefits far outweigh the extra expense of dryers with technology that can detect when items are dry and automatically turn off.

The first return on the investment is by avoiding wasted gas or electricity on linen that is dried longer than necessary, while the additional savings is in the linen itself.

“Over drying linen degrades the fabric, thus shortening its life and making it rough to the touch,” said Everts. “Laundry operators often turn up the fabric softener to cure the rough linen, adding additional expense.”

Outsourcing Laundry—do or don’t?

Often when an outside laundry company presents a proposal to a hospitality property it seems like a good solution to a specific problem, such as having older washers or a broken ironer.

Also, if a property cannot handle the labor expense that is required for in-house linen management, it could be forced to seek an outsourcing service. But what might seem like a quick solution could result in a higher expense in the long run.

“Experience has shown that the costs to outsource are not always lower than the true costs to run a laundry operation,” said Everts. “Additionally the quality controls are not as stringent and the availability of linen is now subject to a delivery schedule.”

Microprocessors

Microprocessors are used in more than 80% of washers sold today. This crucial device gives laundry operators the ability to control the five factors of achieving clean linen: time, temperature, mechanical action, chemical action, and water.

“Because many of the past practices have changed, the laundry manager needs to change the wash formulas to meet those changes,” said Everts. “For example water has become very expensive in many municipalities and cities. Many of the new methods for washing linens can use less water while maintaining excellent results. Many large chain operators have set goals to reduce water and energy usage in their properties. This can be done easily with the microprocessors available on the market.”

Computer monitoring software

Investing in a computer monitoring software system is especially important for large properties as it can provide valuable data to operators in order to make changes to the linen management process.

The data derived from this type of software can help operators know how many labor hours to schedule on a given day and how many towels and linens to process on a given shift. The data can also tell the manager how productive the night shift was versus the day shift.

“In this day and age information is our friend,” said Everts. “Data is used to set bench marks for production and for understanding what is affecting costs.”

Improving hospitality rewash rates

With hospitality rewash rates averaging between 3-5% solutions need to be found to improve outcomes without increasing linen replacement costs.

Everts explained that with correct use of the aforementioned microprocessors, operators can adjust any of the five factors to get the stained linen clean. Operators can additionally use the resources to their best advantage and cause less wear on the linen.

“To lower re-wash, a property can institute a system of pre-treating the linen,” said Everts. “This can be more labor intensive so the cost should be audited to be sure the additional labor is producing the desired effect on dropping the re-wash rate.”

Preventative maintenance

By scheduling regular preventative maintenance of washers, dryers, and folding equipment operators can reduce the risk of damage from unforeseen neglect.

“The cost associated with a piece of equipment that breaks down is not only the repair of that equipment but also the cost associated with getting the job done without it,” said Everts. “This could mean additional labor costs to do something such as folding and stacking (towels) if a small piece folder breaks down.”

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