How Decisions Impact the Big Picture in Hospitality

BY DERI ROSS PRYOR

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT IS A concept born out of chaos theory, which metaphorically proposed that the flap of a butterfly’s wings resulted in a hurricane weeks later. While the concept relies on extreme exaggeration to prove a point, the basic concept is true: even small actions can have big consequences. Or put in a more relevant way, a business decision made today will often have a significant impact on the success of the company at some point down the road.

In terms of hospitality, decisions related to purchasing of textiles and equipment, par levels, staffing levels, policies and procedures related to processing, whether to keep the laundry in house or outsource, and so on, all have an impact on guest satisfaction and thus the success of the property. These decisions should not be made without a thorough understanding of how even small changes can have big impacts, not just in general terms, but also in the minutiae of daily tasks.
As an example, David Bernstein of Lapauw USA says the first step to take when considering decisions that affect the laundry would be to avoid relying on general industry formulas to determine such things as how many pounds of laundry are needed per room.

"There are numbers provided by associations, by manufacturers, by consultants," Bernstein warns, "very general numbers. The problem is that every property is different, every property quality level is different, and those formulas don’t break down how much of that poundage is flat work, how much is terry, and so on. Because of this, and especially with today’s sustainability efforts in hotels, those numbers really do change a lot."

Generic formulas cannot account for fluctuating needs and guest behaviors. For example, a property that caters more to business travelers and conferences may see guests that stay one night only on weekdays, with those rooms requiring a complete change of linen daily. However, that same hotel may see longer stays over the weekend with more people per room. The sheets may not need to be changed, but more towels are required. A luxury resort will have guests staying a week or more which drastically reduces the nightly room change overs, thus reducing the poundage required per room.

A property should also take into account the type of guests they attract. "You might have a property where you expect guests who are more interested in sustainability," Bernstein advises. "They are going to hang up their towels as opposed to leaving them on the floor to be changed. And in other cases, properties know that they have fewer customers who are driven by concerns..."
about sustainability. So understanding your client is important.”

Another consideration is the size and weights of textile items, which Bernstein says many properties do not take into account. “When we try to help properties determine their equipment needs,” he says, “I want to know the exact dimensions of every single one of your textiles, exact materials, and the weight of those items. Because it’s that kind of data that helps us determine the right equipment for a particular property.”

He says to look for consultants and equipment representatives that steer away from generic spreadsheets and formulas, and look for those who have the experience and are data driven so they will find the best equipment for your needs.

As with equipment, textile purchasing decisions can have big impacts. One of the frustrations of laundry managers is getting decision makers/purchasers to understand the importance of maintaining adequate par levels, which Bernstein says should be 3 par, maybe as much as 4 or 5 in some cases.

“Perhaps the biggest problem I see in hotel laundry is the failure of the hotel to ensure that they have enough linen and try to not only outfit each room, but to ensure that they have backups,” Bernstein says. “I have personally been involved in hotel audits where the management of the hotel was adamant that they had industry level par levels. But when actual inventory was taken it was determined that had barely 1.5 par. That means when they turned a room, if they didn’t get that linen to the laundry and back the same day, they would not be able to sell that room that night.”

“If a hotel is running at these low numbers and utilizing an off-site laundry, they are then demanding that their laundry provider make three, four, or more deliveries per day just to make sure that they can get enough linen on the beds and towels in the bathrooms. Instead of saving money by skimping on linen quantities, they are losing money through their laundry contracts and replacing linens worn thin by such frequent washing. This trickles down to guest satisfaction. Dingy pillows and duvet covers will affect a guest’s first impression and possibly repeat business, as will turning away guests because of a low number of ready rooms. Maintaining adequate par and having a good linen replacement program is essential.

Having adequate laundry staff is also a key to producing quality linen, something Phil Jones of Sheraton Vistana Resort in Orlando understands all too well.

“If you aren’t properly staffed,” he says, “you still have to produce linen, but you have to try to do it quicker, and you aren’t going to do that much quality checking because you don’t have the time. You are going to lose quality because you have to put out more productage with less people.”

The other issue is the danger of burning the staff out. Since the machines can’t physically handle more work, it falls on the people to work faster and longer hours which drops morale. Hand in hand with the problem of low staffing burnout is high turnover rates, which also affects quality.

“Any time you bring in someone new,” Jones says, “it takes them 30-45 days to get into what they need to do. They are not going to produce initially at your standards, and if you are continually doing that you get even further behind on your business. It causes overtime in the long run.

“Additionally, a senior laundry employee is taken away from what they do best to work with the new employee, so productivity and quality drop even more.”

When it comes to the causes of high turnover, Jones says there are two things to look at in your facility:

1) “What is the root of the turnover? Why are you losing people from your organization? What can you see that is causing the problem? Maybe a laundry down the street is paying $13 hour when you are paying $10. You have to make a decision, ask ‘what can we do to be more competitive?’ It’s not just about adding pay, but what benefits can we offer to keep them from jumping ship over to the $13 hour laundry. We have to show we are the best choice.”

2) “The turnover may be because, again, you aren’t staffed well enough. If I really need ten people on staff, but I try to save money by only having eight, I’m going to burn those eight people out much faster than I would the ten. So you may be defeating your own purpose of trying to save money by having less staff.”

Jones also says the better you treat your employees, the more you work with them, the more they work with you, the less turnover you have.

“We do a lot for our associates,” he says. “We have a lot of celebrations. We have a separate budget that we allocate for employee relations. We do everything from ice pops, Gatorade, and barbecues, because it’s a very difficult environment. We do everything we can to make them feel like part of the team. Even though they are in the laundry, they get exactly the same training as everyone else in the company. We take a lot of time to get to know them, to make them feel like family.”

Jones says 35% of his staff has at least 20 years’ experience and he loses most of them from either retirement or if the family moves out of the area.

Another factor Jones says contributes to his low turnover rate is the effort to give full timers as many hours as he can, never going lower than 32 hours. During the slow season, he will reduce the hours of contract workers so the fulltime workers can stay at full time hours. They
also look for other avenues to bring in income and keep full timers working. "When the slow economy years came," Jones says, "we took over another Sheraton property during that time which allowed all of our full time workers to receive 40 hours and no one was laid off. A laundry should always look for those opportunities if it is allowed by your facility and you have the necessary equipment to take on more work."

He echoes Bernstein's comments on the importance of product weights. It's basic math and the key component lies in the specific product the property uses.

For example, if a hotel uses a 12 lb towel, with each towel weighing one pound, all processes are based on that weight.

"So you've built your whole budget and staffing levels around this towel weight," Jones says. "But now all of a sudden, the company says we're going with a bigger towel, a 15 lb towel, because they want our quality to go up. Now that the towels weigh 1.25 lbs, you can't wash as many towels in your washer as you used to. That increases your production demands, and you have to actually wash more to get the same exact amount of towels you had before because they have changed the actual product itself." An upgrade in textile quality requires more laundry hours to generate the same amount of linen, which could actually have the opposite of the intended effect.

Jones advocates for a strong partnership across all levels of the property, something that is not frequently seen especially if a property outsources their laundry. To combat this disconnect, his property involves every department during a linen inventory, taking people from the front office, security, housekeeping, engineering and so on. Everyone working together on the count helps them understand how vital the textiles are to the bigger picture and how strongly any changes affects the laundry facility.

"It takes time," Jones admits. "You have to develop that. And you have to get your numbers straight, to justify your reasons why. You can't just walk in and say I need 30 more hours per week and it's going to cost an extra $5000 a week."

He also advises to use available resources, everything from associations like ALM to consultants, attending the CLEAN show and other laundry conferences, or simply calling on other laundries for advice. This helps build a network of knowledgeable people in the industry.

While it may take time, continually working to open the lines of communication between the laundry and the decision makers will be worth the effort in the long run, benefiting the employees, guests, and property.