WHEN ONE OF YOUR CUSTOMERS is a five-star resort, quality measurements occur every day—and the standards are high.

That’s what Brad Houchin, RLLD, CLLM, plant manager for Chickasaw Laundry Service, faces serving a client base of three hotels, all clustered in the WinStar World Casino and Resort family. He provides uniforms in addition to linens used in the hotels, which total nearly 1,700 rooms combined. The laundry facility averages 16,000 pounds per day and between 500 and 1,000 garments per day.

“Safety is always first, but outside of that, quality is the most important thing,” Houchin said. “Even though we have production standards, if we do it right, the numbers will come. If we’re not going to do it right, we’ll have to do it a second time and then the numbers don’t matter.”

What does matter is the expectations from the facilities. Houchin meets with the hotel general managers and housekeeping managers to gauge their needs—and then finds a way to meet or exceed them.

Case in point: One hotel decided it didn’t like the fitted sheets to be ironed because it permanently creased the sheets. So Houchin purchased a blanket folder and converted it to handle the sheets. “That’s how we handle it. We ask the expectation and then figure out how to meet it.”

While that symbiotic relationship between customer expectations and quality standards remains important, there are other ways to ensure that the laundry is delivering quality.

Test-Piece Monitoring Service

Textiles (terry, sheeting, apparel and surgical products) have changed in the last 30 years, generating an increased demand for quality, according to Dr. Elizabeth Easter, manager of the Textile Testing Laboratory at the University of Kentucky, the provider of ALM’s Test-Piece Service.

“Over the years, there have been a number of incidences where members order a number of test pieces because they installed new equipment, they’re changing chemical suppliers or they had an issue with their water supply,” Easter said. “It’s a tool that can be used to monitor changes in performance and/or aesthetics that have occurred as a result of these changes.”

One of the biggest changes Easter has seen is in the quality of the linens.
Institutional linens are no longer a standard thread count and average weight is one medium-quality sheet or towel. “Today, the customer expects a clean white sheet or towel, but they also expect the feel of softness. The expectation of the linen from the customer’s standpoint is for a higher quality sheet and towel and in turn, the laundry manager has to provide a more aesthetically appealing and durable product for the consumer.”

“The test-piece swatch is a 100-percent cotton sheeting fabric that enables the test piece to be comparable to a product that they would be using in the laundry. The test piece service can determine the tensile strength of the product, giving the manager “a tool to measure the durability of the product and in turn the durability is an indication of the service life of the product,” Easter said. The tensile strength can relate to the degradation of a sheet product or other types of linen products.

A second measurement tests whiteness retention. “A majority of the linens in the institutional markets are white,” Easter said. “The test piece fabric has been routinely finished, but not subjected to a high concentration of bleach or more than just a routine finish. They can use this measurement to see if there are issues with the quality of the chemicals or water supply which may lead to discoloring of the test piece.”

Using a test-piece service can be valuable when some new piece of the laundry system—chemical or equipment—is employed. But Easter said that it is best as an “ongoing process instead of a one-time deal. Some may do it monthly or quarterly, but it provides a reference point and enables quality on an ongoing basis.”

ATP Testing
Some facilities may be interested in pursuing ATP testing, which measures biological residues, such as organic matter, cells and biofilm, by detecting levels of adenosine triphosphate (ATP) on hard surfaces. But there are no federal requirements that linens be tested—and there are many questions surrounding the process, said Dr. Lynne Sehulster, a health scientist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“We have not issued a recommendation for routine surface monitoring. Similarly, a number of other standard-setting groups have no recommendations on this issue,” Sehulster said. “We are aware that there is an interest in this bioluminescence assay method in healthcare, but we’ve not seen published evidence that would answer some of our lingering questions about the technique.”

And many of those questions are focused on hard surfaces, which brings concerns about consistency and measurements during ATP testing. For instance, each system manufacturer sets its relative light unit (RLU) value, so the readings from the same surface may be different when one manufacturer’s assay system is compared to that of another manufacturer. When it comes to soft surfaces like linens, the questions are even greater, Sehulster said. The ATP bioluminescence surface monitoring systems were designed originally to monitor hard, nonporous surfaces.

“The problem is that there are a number of factors regarding the situation in which you use these products which might interfere with an interpretation of the results,” she said. For example, some disinfectants might trigger false readings. “Another issue is that you can’t use it on surfaces that are largely organic matter to begin with, such as cotton. You’ll get an artificially high reading because it is picking up the ATP in the cotton. With all the known factors leading to the potential for variability of outcomes, CDC and other groups have just not been forthcoming yet with a blanket recommendation for its use.”

Those laundries that want to explore ATP testing might do so only for internal use, or if a facility wants to use the test when a new product for cleaning surfaces is put in place, Sehulster said. “I know the industry is desiring to move into this area, but the main questions you have to ask are, ‘What do your results mean?’ and, ‘What plan of action do you implement based on those results?’”

That is something that Judy Reino, president of Reino Linen, is working to determine. She is currently partnering with the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council as a test site for setting up ATP protocols for several hard surfaces within the plant. Additionally, Reino sends the “soft” materials—linens—to an outside test lab to be tested as hygienically clean.

Understanding Customer Needs
Reino is not content to let quality standards be determined solely by the science. Surveys—ask customers—can prove beneficial, she said. Reino has two plants but focuses solely on healthcare. Products are a mixture of consumer-owned goods and rentals.

The art of providing quality comes in understanding the customer needs. Some want only new gowns every time. Others will “slightly compromise on the quality of the linen. They’ll accept a patch in a non-patient area to extend the usable life. They convey that to us.”

Those standards are then compiled into what Reino terms “our quality bible. Every employee can look up a customer

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in the book to see what standards they are asking us to comply with. If I am a customer who is willing to tolerate slight medical stains and patches in non-patient areas, if I as a laundry don’t honor that, I’m not extending the usable life of their linen. It becomes a bit complicated because everyone has a slightly different standard.”

The basis of the quality bible is a survey to help Reino understand what each customer is willing to tolerate. Customer service representatives sit with the linen manager at each facility and go through a checklist, asking a series of questions. It is updated each year, which provides an opportunity for the customer to respond to changing situations. “We’re finding that there are more financial pressures placed on our customers,” Reino said. “They become a bit more tolerant of some things. We’ll adjust those standards as needed.”

Twice a year, Reino conducts a customer satisfaction survey. The data is aggregated and Reino personally keeps an eye on trends that are being revealed. In addition, one staff person audits about 10 percent of the carts that go out the door, providing a checklist to Reino each day. “Partnership is critical. It’s an ongoing thing. You don’t just do it one time and forget about it. You have to do it constantly. It’s a constant measurement.”

Maintaining Quality Standards

At Chickasaw Laundry Service, the hotels own the linens, not the laundry, so Houchin’s team simply identifies items that it recommends come out of circulation. “I’ve been told that we’re too picky,” he said. “We identify the stain, process it and send it to them. They make the determination. I don’t pull anything out of circulation unless we damage it.”

The laundry can offer valuable input—beyond quality—when asked. Houchin said that one of the hotels recently purchased new linens without asking the laundry. The old products included blue and green thread, identifying sheets as king or queen-sized. When the new product was purchased, green was gone and blue was on a different sized sheet than previously. Given that some of the old sheets were still in circulation, housekeeping had a difficult time keeping the products straight.

It also created issues for the laundry. “We had to go back and add a second color thread to differentiate the new inventory,” Houchin said. “Had we been involved in that dialogue up front, we might have been able to help them out with that ahead of time. We can work together and say, ‘Here are some things that impact our ability to turn around at the rate that you want or to deliver the quality you expect.’”

Houchin also connects with his customers monthly—and makes the 30-minute drive in person at least once a quarter.

“There’s just something about face to face where people will tell you something that they may not bring up otherwise,” Houchin said. “Small issues can become big issues before they are willing to say something about it. That allows us to keep providing a quality service.”