It All Starts With a Manual

BY DERI ROSS PRYOR

A LAUNDRY OPERATION IS ONLY AS successful as the smooth operation of all of its parts, and none as important as its equipment. Proper equipment operation starts with following the equipment manuals.

Richard Engler, the manager of textile processing at JPS Health Network, refers to manuals as necessary tools that allow laundry technicians and equipment operators to do their jobs efficiently. Without access to those tools, or by improperly using them, a small problem quickly becomes large, grinding work to a halt.

Regardless of the type of equipment or vendor, all manuals will contain these key components:

- Warranty information for the unit as a whole and for specific parts.
- Installation Guide, including site and utility requirements, proper set up, and possibly commissioning plans and checks.
- Operating Guidelines and Procedures, including safety, startup, and shutdown.
- Maintenance Guide, including recommended Preventive Maintenance (PM) schedules and procedures; spare parts list with list of suppliers, recommended total requirements, and schedule of suggested replacement; and mechanical functions and calibrations.
- Repair Procedures, which can be a section by itself or part of the Maintenance Guide, with schematics and diagrams for the mechanical and electrical components.
- Troubleshooting Guide explaining diagnostics, testing, and general problem solving to identify problem sources.

Some manuals come in sections for ease of use. For example, a start-up guide may include only the installation and operating procedures for the day-to-day staff, while PM and repair sections will be in a separate guide for maintenance staff.

“Manuals should be available for all staff,” says laundry services consultant Lynn Dunning, CLLM. “However, restrictions should be placed upon who can remove them from a central storage place. Too often, operational manuals are not available to the right personnel and are lost due to poor control.”
Engler says, "One problem is that manuals are kept in secure locations and are not accessible by the right people. You’d be surprised how far away it often is from the equipment. This impedes operations if the proper sections are not with the equipment. Small problems are routed to maintenance or improperly dealt with to save time. This is when the digital version can be valuable, especially if it is accessible on the machine. Another alternative is to copy and laminate the appropriate pages to keep with the equipment.”

Engler also says the manual is not beneficial if it is not used properly even when accessible. He says he will often quiz operators on troubleshooting problems. If their first instinct is not to follow the procedures outlined in the manual, this is a teachable moment to remind them to not try to diagnose or fix a “symptom” as this can only exacerbate a simple problem and lead to equipment shutdown. Often, maintenance is called for something they could address themselves, which also slows down operations.

Mike Baughman, RLLD, CLLM, the laundry operations manager at North Mississippi Medical Center, adds trainers to the list of people who should have access to the manual. “Training and use of an equipment manual should be addressed, and be an intricate part of the commissioning plan. Equipment owners should always make it a requirement for the vendor to review the manual with all appropriate staff during the commissioning phase of the equipment. It should be included in the contract at purchase, especially on major equipment. A written and agreed upon commissioning plan is important because it makes the expectations of both parties clear.”

The format of the manual can also dictate usability and storage. Many vendors offer both print and digital forms of their manuals. The digital may be a CD-ROM, a downloadable file, or be uploaded directly to the machine and accessible through digital displays. As for the pros and cons of each format, Baughman says, “The best answer I can give is ‘it depends.’ Are the folks that are required to access the manuals computer savvy? Are they comfortable with staring at a computer screen and scrolling around looking at a schematic? If so, digital may be best. If not, a good old hard copy may work best, but it must also be accessible.”

Engler says that he prefers both. “New equipment has built-in computers and you can access the information on a digital display. However, this can get you into trouble if the display is compromised by whatever is wrong, so you also need the paper version. Some manufacturers offer it on CD-ROM or online. This is nice because it can update automatically. Updates to the operating software of a machine that is online could be pushed out to the equipment and updated whenever necessary. Online manuals could also have near instantaneous updates and a complete list of all technical bulletins that would allow for an easier decision on when/how to make a change/upgrade. Having the latest technical information makes it easier to choose how to best accomplish the task.”

Richard Hoelscher, RLLD, CLLM, the production manager of PHHS Linen Services, also recommends both formats. “Printed copies are best to carry out to the machine and utilize while performing maintenance and troubleshooting. It should be emphasized that maintenance and troubleshooting are two different things. The first greatly reduces the second. Printed copies have a tendency to get lost and dirty over time. Digital copies are harder to work with at the machine. Digital copies are utilized in the office and to print new copies, as needed.”

From a practical standpoint, each section is only useful if it is properly utilized. For example, Baughman advises, “Suggested preventive maintenance schedules, ‘or time-based maintenance,’ are typically driven by the vendor as are spare parts lists. The buyer should ask to see the statistical data that drives the proposed PM schedule and spare parts list and not accept arbitrary proposals by the vendor. As PM is being done, wear and tear observations should be taking place as well. This allows for an operator or maintenance technician to catch something before it actually breaks. Repairs can be planned and parts ordered before there is a failure and subsequent downtime. Spare parts inventories should be based on the risk of not having that part when needed, and the frequency of change/life cycle of the part.”

Dunning recommends that PM requirements, lists of parts, contact information for vendors and parts suppliers, and warranty information should all be digitized and shared with the operations managers and maintenance personnel. The original manuals can serve as back-up for the information and stored in secure locations.

Engler adds the issue of language. If equipment is manufactured in a country that speaks a different language, the manual must be translated properly or misunderstandings and misinterpretations can cause a breakdown in operations and maintenance. Sometimes schematics or diagrams retain labeling in the original language requiring time to translate and identify key components. “It turns the manual into a blunt tool,” Engler warns. This can also be a problem the other way, such as when you have an English manual but operators for whom English is not their first language. It is vital to have a properly translated version, so they can perform their job properly and safely.

Often, equipment manuals can be seen as a “one-and-done” component of new equipment: once the machine is up and running, the manual may be tossed to the side until trouble erupts. As outlined here, this should not be the case. The equipment manual should be an essential part of daily operations to ensure continued success of any laundry facility.