

Sustainability— Making a Difference with ‘Green’ Laundering

Initiatives ranging from rainwater recapture to idling-prevention telematics earn ROI and goodwill for companies, industry



By D. Douglas Graham

The term “sustainability” is often bandied about by companies and private groups focused on preserving the environment, but people don’t always understand what it means. Today’s common definition of sustainability centers on using resources in ways that meet the current generation’s needs, while at the same time ensuring that future generations can do the same.

In terms of textile services, a company is “sustainable” when it meets the financial, social and environmental challenges inherent in doing business. This process also is known as meeting the “triple bottom line.”

Industrial laundries today are embracing sustainability by implementing image-enhancing “green” technologies and processes that lower costs, while at the same time conserving natural resources and reducing wastes entering the air and water. Below are several examples of TRSA member companies that are putting sustainability to work in a big way.

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PRAGMATISM NOT DOGMATISM

“AmeriPride Services is committed to clean operations and sustainability,” says Brian Keegan, senior vice president of plant operations and supply chain. “We strictly adhere to government regulations and voluntary self-regulatory activities, such as TRSA’s Environmental Stewardship

Program (LaundryESP®) and Clean Green certification. We’ve also adopted green initiatives company-wide. These include water-reuse and heat-reclamation systems, alternative-fuel vehicles and hybrids, boiler and equipment replacement, re-routing and idle-reduction tools, and the installation of pilot solar panels and fuel-saving telematics technology in all company vehicles.”

Companies like AmeriPride are implementing technologies and protocols that are “greening” their operations and changing the way the industry does business. Another laundry deeply vested in sustainability is Crown Linen Service Inc., Nashua, NH. Recently, the company came to grips with a growing environmental and cost issue resulting from excessive idling. A number of measures were applied to the problem with varying degrees of success. As it turned out,

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none offered a permanent remedy until Crown enhanced the GPS system of its delivery fleet vehicles and partnered with Sustainable America Inc., an environmental nonprofit group, on a telematics-tracking solution.

“When we implemented the software, the routes were logging an average of 70 minutes of idling time per day,” says fleet supervisor, David Hardy. “We have five locations, and after speaking with the manager at each, we made a decision as a company to cut our idling time to just 10 minutes.”

Telematics software documents idling at each location, Hardy adds. Unacceptable results leave drivers in denial with no choice but to accept the hard evidence, and that can open doors of discovery as to why some locations are more prone to idling than others.

“Usually there’s a good reason,” Hardy says. “Security measures at the point of delivery; idling at our own dock in the morning or evening. Anything like that can increase idling time, but when you pin this stuff down you’re in a position to work around it, and that we’ve done with great success. Our current idling time is seven minutes per route, three minutes less than our original goal of 10!”

Crown has run green for a long time, Hardy adds. Inside, the plant employs water and heat recycling, and just about every other sustainability initiative germane to a laundry operation. The company is always on the lookout for opportunities to improve operations that aren’t green enough, often for reasons that are purely practical. Sustainable business isn’t just environmentally responsible. It saves money. According to Hardy, idling-prevention technology currently earns fuel savings of \$1,500 to \$2,000 per month. Crown Linen has 30 routes. Larger operations obviously stand to save more in fuel savings, but idling prevention is only one component of sustainability applicable to laundries, and most carry with them significant savings potential that can benefit the bottom line.

“Becoming a green laundry won’t necessarily bring a herd of new customers to your door,” says Jeremy Kranowitz, executive director, Sustainable America, Stamford, CT, which focuses on increasing America’s food availability and reducing its oil consumption. “Payback often comes in the form of cost-savings, achieved through energy- and water-use reduction.

“The practical side of sustainability sells a lot more easily than pushing someone against the wall with dogmatism about the need to do what’s right. Sustainability saves money. It’s as

RESOURCE CONSERVATION

simple as that. For a business, that should be ample reason to go green.”

SUSTAINABILITY IN ACTION

Another idea related to sustainability is the concept of generating your own power to run industrial laundry equipment. With co-generation technology, heat and electricity are produced simultaneously. This results in energy savings of up to nearly 40%. Co-generation helps lower greenhouse gas emissions with equipment powered by clean-burning, natural gas instead of coal. But its green dividend is earned mainly in the dollars recouped from reduced energy use. In other words, co-gen, is another sustainable technology with practical benefits for launderers.

Nearly four years ago, Bates Troy Inc., a healthcare laundry in Binghamton N.Y., went shopping for a fail-safe power system that would allow it to work 24/7, even in the event of a blackout. This was essential given the company’s client base, as the life-and-death stakes entailed in hospital and nursing home operation require that facilities remain operational, regardless of whether or not the power flows. For a time, the company looked at a backup diesel generator, but passed on it when it turned out there were no state-funded grants or tax rebates available to offset the steep cost of the technology, (roughly \$250,000). A gas generator also wouldn’t have qualified for government aid.

“When we explored co-gen we found what we’d been looking for all along,” says Compliance and Special Projects Coordinator, Ed Arzouian. “A straight generator dumps power straight into a radiator, but with co-gen you get heat and power. That’s two forms of energy in one package. It’s a really good fit for a laundry that runs 24/7, since co-gen actually saves on energy cost the more you use it. An even better aspect for laundry is that co-gen heats a large quantity of water. Two shifts pay back faster than one, and when the system runs around the clock your savings actually triple. The down side of co-generation is its price, which fortunately for us is offset by grants provided by the New York State Energy Research & Development Authority (NYSERDA) and the

Empire State Development Corp. (ESD, the state’s economic development agency). We’re going on line with co-gen in a couple of months.”

Not every sustainable initiative saves money but most will earn their keep, and then some. This was a lesson White Plains Linen of Peekskill, NY, recently learned. A few years ago, the company consolidated its three plants in an industrial park cohabited by Wheelabrator Technologies Inc., a waste-to-energy converter, based in Hampton, NH. Last August, White Plains cut a deal with the company to purchase steam, which it currently uses to power all its processes.

“This has worked out really well,” reports White Plains operations vice president and COO, Len Labonia. “The arrangement cleaned up our processes by eliminating the need to run boilers. Cost-savings have been flat, but our carbon emissions have gone way down.”

White Plains’ fossil fuel consumption has shrunk dramatically. It’s down from 2013’s total of 944,855 therms to just 98,624 therms for 2014. The laundry has also invested in a rainwater-capture program that currently adds 7.5 million gallons per year to its wash process. Innovations such as these enhance self-sufficiency, reduce carbon footprint, and in many cases lower costs.

GREEN COMES NATURALLY

“Laundries already enjoy a head start in this area,” says John Shaffer, president, EEC Environmental Inc., an environmental consultant in Orange CA, servicing a range of industries nationwide. “Most have been reusing textiles for a long time, which means they weren’t land-filling before not land-filling became popular. Some laundries have also invested aggressively in wastewater-recycling systems and tunnel washers, which make it possible to use the same wash water several times—thereby saving water and energy. These are not inexpensive technologies, but responsible companies in the textile trade are embracing them, and it’s making a difference.” TS

D. Douglas Graham is a freelance writer based in St. Louis.