

OPL 101

Inner workings of a Las Vegas linen company

BY JOSEPH W. DRAMISE

LAS VEGAS — For the more than 41 million tourists who visit Sin City each year, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. This includes the dirty laundry—no pun intended—that's left behind after visitors have returned home.

Every day, the inevitable piles of used linens, bedding, tablecloths and towels from one wave of visitors must be turned around quickly for the next. As the owner of a local linen service company, I'm reminded daily of the streamlined process necessary to ensure fresh linens greet every guest at many of the city's renowned hotels. The unique logistics we face to ensure we meet our clients' expectations, and thus their customers' expectations, for a steady supply of quality linens may impress you as well.

24/7 DEDICATED SERVICE

At the simplest level, a linen service company's job is to transport soiled and clean linens from point A to point B, and vice versa. Look a little closer, and it's easy to see there is much more involved in the process.

There are more than 150,500 hotel/motel rooms in Las Vegas, according to the city's Convention and Visitors Authority. With 10 major hotels on our client list, Apex Linen's throughput easily tops 180,000 pounds per day.

Besides the obvious sheets, pillowcases and bath towels that are exchanged daily, ancillary items such as curtains, throw pillows and blankets must undergo regular cleanings. If the hotel has a fitness center, spa, restaurant and/or bar, other specialty items must also be laundered. That's where a hotel's on-premises laundry (OPL), or a commercial laundry service like Apex comes in.

To ensure linen inventory in each client's hotel is fulfilled at all times, 10 of our 300 total

employees are designated to work off-site at a specified hotel. These full-time specialists, called linen inventory personnel, are the facility's eyes and ears to a hotel's linen needs. He or she continuously takes stock of inventory to make sure par levels are fulfilled and that customers are satisfied with quality.

This employee also facilitates the daily pick-up of soiled laundry and drop-off of clean laundry, which occurs at designated hours 365 days a year. At any given time, 14 trucks cruise the Strip and surrounding areas to collect or distribute laundry carts containing clients' linens and ancillary items.

STREAMLINED PROCESS

Back at the facility, a diverse equipment mix gives us the capabilities to process whatever the item may be, eliminating the need for a hotel to outsource linens to several vendors at a time. With such a high daily throughput, time is of the essence. As such, keeping machines in working order is critical to keep clean linens flowing. Our machines run as many as 20 hours per day, which is why we only install those known for reliability, combined with technologies that make our operation more productive and cost-effective.

For example, 15 washer-extractors and 12 tumble dryers are designated to process clients' ancillary items. This can include floor mats, uniforms, decorative pillows, spa or beverage service items. These items comprise about 15% of our daily volume, yet require special attention. But the process does not have to be burdensome.

With machines that allow us to



An overview of Apex Linen taken in 2014. The linen service company's throughput easily tops 180,000 pounds per day in serving a client list that includes 10 major Las Vegas hotels. (Photo: Apex Linen)

customize cycles based on typical loads, processing is as easy as selecting the appropriate program and pressing the start button. Another key capability of our machines is that their control systems record a history of what cycles were used (and therefore what materials were processed), cycle times, and time between cycles.

These performance indicators are important because they allow managers to ensure quality is maintained and that workflow is as productive as possible. We can also use this information to make improvements to the operation, and to ensure water and utility usage is at its lowest—a business practice that is becoming ever-important, especially on the West Coast.

To process the other 85% of items that come through our doors, which includes bedding and towels, we rely heavily on radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology. This tool allows us to take inventory of full laundry carts in seconds, before they are washed in continuous batch washers.

An electronic reader scans a cart, and can determine exactly how many pieces of linen and what materials a cart contains. We can then track this batch of linens throughout its time at the facility—a process that includes unloading, washing, drying, folding, sorting and loading.

With such a high volume of linens going in and out of our doors each day, this technology keeps us accountable to our clients, because it ensures the correct items are being laundered and returned to the proper hotel in a timely fashion. It also eliminates the need to manually track linens, saving time and money.

LUXURY EXPERIENCE

The nature of the laundry business makes downtime lethal—if one machine goes out, the whole operation is thrown off-kilter. That's why only the most dependable and innovative equipment is installed, minimizing the chance of maintenance issues.

Additionally, equipment and systems that allow us to reuse water and heat demonstrate that we're doing our part to conserve resources.

When an expansion to our facility is completed later this year, we'll be able to process an additional 100,000 pounds per day. Some may see that as an opportunity for more to go wrong, but by extending the processes in place that currently make us successful, I see it as a chance to provide even more luxury hotels with quality linens and punctual service.

The next time you visit a Las Vegas hotel, or a hotel anywhere for that matter, take a look around. The linens, textiles and fabrics that fill the building are carefully selected to give guests a premium experience. As laundry experts, it is our job to maintain this quality and, therefore, guests' satisfaction throughout their stay.

Guests may see a napkin, pillowcase or towel simply for what they are, but we in the laundry industry know and appreciate the journey these items take from a guest's room, to a hotel's OPL or commercial laundry service, and back again, 365 days a year.

Amidst Las Vegas' 24-hour gaming, endless entertainment and world-class dining, the significance of that journey can remain our little secret. **ALN**

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