Inventory Depletion—Fight Back With Facts, Part 2

Some hoteliers are losing two-thirds of the value of their bed linens due to theft and/or undetected quality issues.

By Sam Garofalo

As any laundry operator knows, we must be ever-vigilant in seeking ways to economize, reinvent, and monitor the changes that occur in our plants every day. We all hear and respond to the sound of a bad bearing in a washer during extract. But for the most part we seem to overlook the condition of textiles.

SENSING TROUBLE

We look for stains, whiteness of course, but often we choose to ignore excessive lint, rips and tears. We don’t seem to respond as much to the general condition of textile products. In many cases, especially with customer-owned goods (COG), operators take the view that linen depletion is the hotelier’s problem. That attitude is costing our industry big time financially and hurting relationships with customers. In several field studies in the last three or four years it was literally impossible to pinpoint the cause of damage to textiles. In order to get a handle on the issue, Technical Consulting developed some programs to take a proactive stance on textile issues. We found that pretesting the fabric would give us a clear indication of what we can expect regarding textile integrity and longevity. Also, closely tracking the washroom processing by monitoring the chemical technicians’ service reports and periodically running test swatches or LTP tests guarantees consistent chemical-process integrity. These activities will protect the laundry owner by isolating the cause of premature textile failure. Another procedure includes training managers, machine operators and maintenance staff to observe the linen passing through the flatwork finishing machines as many times as possible daily. Rips, tears and other damage to the fabric are likely indicators of textile integrity issues. Don’t ignore these symptoms. They’re trying to tell you something.

The sooner you diagnose the problem and correct it, the better. Take a piece of the damaged fabric and try ripping it in both directions. If it rips easier in one direction than the other,

Editor’s note: This is the second in a two-part series on inventory depletion and how operators can help address this problem.
there's a good possibility that you may have a defect in the product. If it feels strong in both directions, but you're seeing the rips and tears, it's probably a mechanical issue. Tearing easily in both directions and other signs of wear can indicate that the sheet has just reached its life expectancy, or has chemical damage. In any case, these tests and procedures are literally pennies per thousand, if you have a problem.

Textile performance is a critical component of a well-run operation, but these goods can't perform if they aren't in the inventory. What's more, I can't stress enough the impact that pilferage has on laundry operations. In my 50+ years in the industry, I've seen bar mops stolen off of a truck during a weekly delivery to supply a car wash with wiping rags. I've seen soakers that were the precursors to barrier incontinent pads removed from a linen cart on a unit and used to service a small nursing home, then washed and sold to a car wash for rags. Pilferage in the laundry business can be measured in the billions of dollars, that's with a 'B.'

150X A blended sheet can be washed 150 times and show no signs of failure.

Knowing the different areas of inventory depletion is an important part of a prevention effort. My experience is that towels will be stolen for souvenirs, whereas sheeting, pillowcases etc. fall prey to felonious entrepreneurs and are stolen in bulk. Most of the organized pilferage is from the hotel property or in transit. How can we recapture this lost asset? The hotelier would rather blame the laundry than take action against the guest, and we don't like going to the hotel and telling them that they have to put more linen in service because you're being forced to turn their goods in a day!

The place to look for good intel is where all of the responsibility falls on the hotelier. They have their own laundry in the basement and nobody to blame. What do those five-star properties with OPLs do to prevent linen losses? One of these properties displays a very attractive card with a message that states, "We know that you, our honored guests, love our fine linens, towels, bathrobes, hand irons and glasses. Please feel free to take any of these items and we will debit your credit card upon your checkout, thank you." Do they really debit the card? I doubt it, but the message is a clear deterrent. Linen storage rooms should be locked and equipped with CCTV and monitored vigilantly. All hotel personnel should be alerted, trained, and rewarded for reporting wholesale theft issues. While working at a JW Marriot in Indianapolis, I conducted one of my little system checks and was stopped cold, but that was one in about 100. It was actually a little scary because the guard apparently thought he had caught John Dillinger. I had to give him the card of the GM and suggest that he call him before he believed me. Encourage your customers to tighten up security, but show them some creative ideas for achieving that goal.
And don’t forget to tell them that they may get twice the linen life on their inventory.

Later this year, watch for findings from TRSA’s Hospitality Linen Lifecycle survey that Perl and Alexander, LLC is conducting. Technical Consulting is assisting with the textile-testing component of this work that will provide benchmarking and tools to help commercial laundries and hoteliers better manage textiles. Hotel companies and laundries that participate in the TRSA Hospitality Linen Life survey will qualify to receive a free copy of the survey findings. Contact TRSA for more information.

**FABRIC FROM A TORN 60/40 COTTON/POLYESTER SHEET**

Many cotton fibers in each yarn are broken. The cotton fibers which are not broken show damage. The polyester fibers look normal.

**YARN REMOVED FROM 60/40 COTTON/POLYESTER TORN SHEET**

This image shows that the same damage seen in the fabric is visible on the yarn removed from the fabric.

Later this year, watch for findings from TRSA’s Linen Loss and Replacement Survey for the Hospitality industry that Matt Alexander of Perl and Alexander is drafting. Technical Consulting was asked to provide specific usage data in this effort. The Techgrid® system, which tracks specific pieces during multiple tests, was used during a three-day on-site visit. The results of that testing aren’t yet available. However, from previous similar testing, we found similar results where some fabrics fail in as few as 25 processings and others survive 150 processings. There is a huge misconception that you only get 45 to 50 washes out of a sheet. You may only get 45 to 50 servings to the customer, but that’s generally based on inventory control-system numbers! In extensive testing with the cooperation of Royal Hospitality Services of Somerville, MA, we have seen that a blended sheet can be washed 150 times and show no signs of failure. However, serving numbers remain in the low 50s.

If I could make only one point, this is it: if you get 50 servings out of a sheet, and normal wash processing is in excess of 150, that means that 100 opportunities for service were lost someplace else. The loss of 100 servings to other factors is huge! We need to tap this resource! In a COG plant, the laundry operator has the potential to save his customer up to two-thirds of their linen-replacement costs—not to mention reducing the headaches associated with having to turn inventory daily when par levels drop below 1.5.

The scary thing is that when these problems arise with a phone call from a five-star property, you’ve already missed the opportunity to isolate the cause. If you see something that doesn’t look right, investigate all of your operating procedures to eliminate it from your facility as the cause of the damage. If it’s not your fault, go to the hotelier and offer to help them solve their problem. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and you might find that if you take a proactive stance on linen depletion, your customer will welcome you as a hero, not a zero! T5

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