



THAT'S A WRAP!

Automated finishing systems offer a 'life-changing' paradigm shift as laborsaving machinery gains wide acceptance

By *Barbara L. Barnes*

In Hollywood, at the conclusion of filming the director yells “That’s a wrap!” In the laundry industry, we call it packout. Laundry processing concludes in the final grouping and presentation of goods to the customer. Just as in plating a gourmet meal, linen presentation greatly effects the customer’s perception of received quality and value. Consequently, the laundry industry slowly adopts changes to the finishing process’s steps.

Laundries have used automated folders/stackers for sheets, pillowcases, tabletops, napkins and larger towels for many years. Although machine folded and counted, employees individually secured bundles with string, banding, or poly wrap. Laundries continued to hand count, fold, stack and bundle small pieces such as shop

towels, bar towels, kitchen towels, grill rags, microfiber items and washcloths.

Enter the paradigm shift for both laundries and customers in how they handle and receive goods. Equipment (such as the Autobag Ergocon Textile Packaging System, Rennco Vertic L-PP Laundry Bagging System and Felins® Automatic Shrink Wrapping System) has added to laundry finishing options. Many laundries now feed items into poly bags or heat-seal wrap bundles automatically. In light of this change, what considerations, challenges and benefits have owner/operators experienced?

THE NEED: LABOR AND PRODUCTION

Quality finishing requires expensive, exacting workers who are difficult to find. All six laundry executives interviewed for this article cited labor concerns as the initial stimulus for adopting finishing automation.

Depending on the markets served, most owner/operators described replacing manual processes with a bagging system for shop towels, bar towels, kitchen towels, grill wipes and microfiber towels/wet

mops. Dave Manter, director of operations, Balfurd Linen Service, Tipton, PA says they bag “anything our customers will let us.” Tyler Burke, plant manager, Loop Linen Services Inc, Westwego, LA, adds to the list enviro napkins for their lesser-end eating establishments. Todd Deaton, senior vice president, uniforms and linen, Wildman Uniform, Warsaw, IN, says they bag all of their “fluff” goods including bath towels, massage towels and wash cloths. Since they service many truck stops, Deaton says that the motel/hotel market may not accept the practice, whereas their clientele does. The towels “fluff up fine.”

The consensus view among these laundry executives is that labor savings was the initial reason for their move to finishing-side automation. Burke describes the need to “engineer people out” to control costs. Deaton also cites the challenge of finding qualified people to work amid a fiercely competitive market for labor in Northern Indiana. Greg Hersey, vice president, Superior Linen Service, Tacoma, WA, adds that the increased minimum wage in Washington state (\$12 per hour; moving to \$14.25 in 2022) lead his company to look for ways to automate to “get back to where we want

to be” in terms of labor costs. The state’s minimum wage is slated to rise to \$14.25 by 2022.

Paul Kramer, chairman, City Uniforms and Linen, Findlay, OH, describes how after the economic challenges of the 2008-’10 Great Recession he “saw a narrower version of who we were. If we were going to sell on value, we needed to be efficient.” Kramer claims that he reduced labor by eight full-time-equivalent employees (FTEs) on the first day after he completed his bagger installation. Hersey says he saved three FTEs. Steve Marcq, director of business development, General Linen Service, LLC, Somersworth, NH, says he saved two FTEs. Kramer quips that the equipment “shows up to work every day and I don’t have to pay health insurance!”

Manter adds that, “Preparing bar towels was taking up a significant portion of our time so the conversion was a no-brainer.” Burke says that when hand folding they were processing 30,000 towels a day, which took all day between two shifts. Now they are bagging around 40,000 a day in one shift.

Labor savings and production increases drive return of investment (ROI) evaluations. Kramer estimates a four month ROI, while Hersey anticipates a 12-13 month ROI, thus making the bagger a simple purchase decision.

OPERATOR REACTIONS AND METHODS

Since bagging changes the work process, employee reactions and acceptance also influence results. Burke says, “The operators like the system because they are now inspecting rather than counting and staying on pace. The standard is now 3,000 pieces per hour rather than 1,000. That has increased morale.” Deaton says, “Training of operators took a bit longer than expected. They had to learn how to inspect in a different way.”

Differences in pace setting and inspection procedures appeared to motivate system selection. While the some models set a

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pace, others work at operator(s)’s pace. Opinions split on the preferred method. Similarly polarized viewpoints involved handling/inspecting every piece versus an elimination-only handling method.

Practical aspects of plant space and expected growth direct any equipment purchase decision. Many of the laundry executives interviewed for this article indicated that they were on their second purchased unit due to their growth in bagged items. Many of them indicated purchasing to meet possible increased

demands. Others cited equipment footprint size as a factor that affected their decision.

HESITATION ISSUES

Although many owner/operators indicated that auto bagging is more a norm than hand finishing today, they adopted the process with concerns regarding customer acceptance. All describe an extensive customer education/marketing program prior to initiating the system. Most indicated customer acceptance of the change in lieu of an anticipated price hike. Burke says that a select few (less than 3%) were

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“old school” customers who still wanted hand folding. Hersey describes educating customers to hang the bag from the wall for use. Deaton’s sales force bought “S” hooks for the training. He says the only negative customer feedback he received was to reduce their initial bagged kitchen towels quantities from 50 to 25.

Manter describes marketing the safety improvements from eliminating bundling straps and the increased hygienic quality of the product. Burke adds that the bags offer another marketing aspect

to their TRSA Hygienically Clean certification.

Marcq describes how the change enabled standardization of ordering quantities of goods. His previous bagging system used fixed bag sizes. A standard bag of bar towels contains 33 pieces, whereas the same bag holds 25 kitchen towels. Their new system can modify the bag size to a standard number, thus providing accounting benefits. Manter says the only drawback to the bags was that they don’t stack as well for handling and delivery.

AUTO BUNDLE WRAPPING BENEFITS/ CONSIDERATIONS

Bagging systems cannot accommodate items prone to unacceptable wrinkling, such as table linens, bed linens or bath goods. Although string or band-tied bundles allowed post-processing “breathing,” most laundries progressed to poly-wrapping stacks manually at post-folding workstations.

Enter automated poly wrapping, a technology that the laundry executives we

BELOW: (Clockwise from top/left) napkins encased in plastic emerge from an auto-wrapping machine; employees feed bar mops into an automatic bagging system. Another view of automatic wrapping equipment; an employee feeds bar mops into another type of auto-bagging system.



interviewed associate with Felins. The system transfers finished bundles from ironer and dry fold equipment via conveyors to the auto-wrapping mechanism. The system adapts to the plant layout via straight and cornering transfer conveyors, a traffic control system, a wrapper (aka bagger) and a shrink tunnel.

Kramer describes how, after the technology caught his eye at a Clean Show, he emotionally wanted the unit but was challenged to calculate an ROI for it. "We could never get all our stuff shrink-wrapped in a timely manner. There was always a long line of bundles waiting for processing and it was very disruptive to the whole plant. There was a dam in production. Now (with the system) all products are available to ship to the customer. Productivity increased because workers are not searching the plant for product. It impacted inventory control because items were done, ready for use. It provided savings in inventory like being able to use one less par."

Marcq confirms the productivity benefits from their auto wrapper. Since the installation in June, they eliminated two FTEs and anticipate a 17-18 month ROI. Marcq believes that the seal is better and more consistent than the manual system. Fewer bundles break open.

He also describes some drawbacks to consider. He says that the wrapping is slightly looser than the material used for manual wrapping, thus enabling some sliding in the package. "Before, the bundles were a more solid object. This looser bundle can create more fish eyes and creases if the workers do not handle them more cautiously. However, we can grab the bundles by the plastic so there is less tearing than with the manual system."

Speaking of the wrapping material used, Marcq adds that, "Our plastic costs increased 20% over our prior methods but this was offset by the labor savings. Initially, we also found the wrapping slippery, creating problems in stacking. We now use a less slippery plastic. It costs 8% more but it is worth it to us."

Whether auto bagging, wrapping or both, all of the executives we interviewed for this article recommended the change. As Hersey puts it, "If you are looking for an increase in production or big labor savings, a bagger will give you both." He describes bagging technology as "the wave of the future." Burke adds that, "It worked wonders for us." Kramer advises any potential purchaser, "This is

going to be life changing. I can't imagine owning a laundry without it." **TS**

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