Across the Wash Aisle, Pt. 1

Perspectives from laundry supply vendors who became operators

*Among the ranks of TRSA’s X,XXX members, there are a number of individuals who have worked both as laundry operators, as well as vendor/suppliers. Having labored on both sides of the wash aisle gives them unique takes on our industry. We spoke with several of these people to get their opinions on matters of product quality, supply issues and customer service. This duality in their professional experience may blend their takes on these topics into singular perspectives, but this month we will focus on vendors-turned-operators.*

A 60-year veteran of the laundry industry, **Bill Mann** launched his career in 1958, operating wash equipment and unloading delivery trucks while still in high school. He continued to work in the business throughout college, and by 1970, he was plant manager of a laundry processing 500,000 lbs. of goods weekly. Reliability and observed deadlines were sacred. But in the pre-dawn hours one morning in 1972, Bill Mann’s ability to deliver on those promises was threatened.

“My plant’s boilers would not start at 5:00 am,” he recalls.  And in an incredible stroke of bad timing, he adds, “my chief engineer was on vacation.  So I called the owner of the company that occasionally serviced the boiler. He personally was at my plant in 45 minutes, and he had one of his mechanics there by 6:30 am.  We lost less than one hour of production time that day.  His mechanic stayed at my plant for the rest of the day making adjustments so that we would not experience another failure the next morning.  And yet he returned at 5:00 a.m. the next day, anyway, to make sure that the boiler fired up properly.” Disaster averted, and an extraordinary act of customer service that Bill Mann still recalls 45 years later.

Bill went on to spend the better part of a decade as a chemical supplier before returning to the laundry side, and later as a consultant with TRSA. But among all his professional guises, his approach to customer service was informed by that experience early in his career. “I have tried my best to follow the principle of treating others the way I would like to be treated.  With my suppliers, this concept worked very well – we worked hard, bargained hard, and respected each other.”

**Customer Service Benchmarks & Low Marks**

**Carey Scurria**, Strategic Account Manager with Crothall Healthcare has seen the good, the bad and the ugly with regard to customer service in her 26-year career in the laundry industry. “I’ve had a supplier get in their own personal vehicle and drive for hours to deliver a product or help out on a service issue, and then be there until all was resolved satisfactorily.  Those are the suppliers that you can call in the middle of the night—they respond, have suggestions, develop a plan and truly partner with the laundry.

“On the flip side, when something goes wrong, what is done at that point to satisfy the customer in an adverse situation?  Does the vendor/supplier give alternatives and a plan to correct it or do they ignore the situation?  Is the supplier honest and forthcoming regarding the issue in order to correct the problem? Many times a vendor promises a delivery time of a product –the situation is time-sensitive—and the product does not always arrive when guaranteed.  I’ve had suppliers that were aware of this issue and did nothing but say, ‘we’ll send you another one,’ which puts the laundry in a bad position with their customers and erodes the operator/supplier relationship.”

**Charles Berge** earned his customer service pedigree in his years with Aramark, the acknowledged industry leader in uniform rentals. Today, he serves as President & General Manager of Shared Hospital Services, one of the nation’s leading textile maintenance and linen providers in the healthcare industry.

“What I appreciate is a supplier that delivers as promised. I have a textile supplier that delivers great customer service each and every time. The orders are packed properly, paperwork is accurate, and they communicate when there is an issue. As an operator I don’t like surprises, and they make my job easier.

“Conversely, I have had a textile supplier that, quite frankly, couldn’t get a delivery right. They were continually sending the wrong product and there was never any communication with them unless I initiated it. Usually, I didn’t discover these errors until we received the delivery or after the product had been unpacked and stored. This would create billing issues as well, which is an even bigger headache. Eventually, I addressed these matters in writing and, ultimately, we discontinued purchases from them.”

**Where in the world is my order?**

Widely acknowledged by our panel of professionals is that modern-day tracking provided by shipping companies –from the U.S. Postal Service to UPS, FedEx and other providers—has largely eliminated the mystery of where vital shipments may be or when they will arrive.

**Bill Mann**: “Yes, today’s technology has largely solved these issues.”

**Carey Scurria**: “However, once a product is shipped, everyone tends to forget about it, assuming it’s going to find its way to the right address, right person, at the right time.  It’s usually not until the customer calls and says, “Where’s my order?” that anyone realizes that something is wrong.  If something goes missing, that’s when you find out what service culture the supplier has and what their commitment is to its customers.”

With regard to delivery of parts or equipment, shipping and tracking may only be secondary concerns. Matters of availability, fulfillment and quality of goods are all variables, especially when ordering from overseas suppliers.

Is the service better from a U.S. company’s dealer network versus a national office of an international supplier based here in the States?

**Bill Mann**: “When I was in business, I used both direct suppliers and distributors.  My decisions were based on the individual representatives with whom I dealt and on my analysis of actual costs.”

**Charles Berge: “**In my operation, I utilize both U.S and International equipment suppliers, and weighing the pros and cons, I wouldn’t hesitate to order from an international equipment supplier. My experience has shown better service and parts availability, actually, from the international suppliers.”

**Carey Scurria**: “Building good relationships with suppliers so that they understand the laundry’s needs and expectations is paramount.  An understanding of what parts and service a laundry can get, anticipated delivery time and emergency contingencies are part of the decision for selecting *any* supplier, domestic or international.”

**From the Help Desk**

Of course, hand-in-hand with parts’ availability and timely fulfillment are matters of service. If a machine or a system crashes, the clock starts ticking, customers begin calling, and an operator’s bottom line starts eroding.

When questions are raised about the prompt scheduling and dispatch of service people, reactions are mixed.

**Charles Berge:** “No! There are not enough field service people to take care of problems when they arise or to train laundry staff on machines that have been purchased. This is an ongoing issue in the laundry industry regardless of whether the provider is U.S.-based or international. Having said that, my experience is that I have seen better-trained service reps from the international suppliers.

“Many of the equipment manufacturers sell service contracts of which I am a big fan. The problem with them is getting the manufacturer to commit to the service dates even after they have been scheduled. This is an issue that has to be addressed by the manufacturers in the immediate future.”

**Bill Mann**: “My experience has been ‘yes’—service, scheduling and personnel have been satisfactory.

**Carey Scurria**: “It depends upon the firm. The trend for suppliers has been toward increasing coverage and reps for improved customer service to clients.”

**Go global or stay home?**

And as we’ve touched on the topic of “domestic versus international,” a recurring question that many launderers have had is whether the quality of textiles from overseas suppliers rivaled that of U.S. products. And, if not, does the price differential (domestic often being less expensive) warrant a foreign purchase? To address these questions, we turned to **Andy Feldman**, VP of Sales Gravy.com, a 360-business consulting firm, and whose family has been operating Pittsburgh’s CleanCare laundry enterprise for more than 80 years.

“The reality of the quality of textiles –or any product—usually falls into that gap between an individual’s expectations and what they actually get—perception versus reality. If you order what you need to get the job done, not the premier product just because it’s been touted as “top of the line,” that’s all you need. I don’t need a Ferrari to drive from home to the office. Keeping that philosophy in mind, I’ve never seen that big a gap in price *or* quality between domestic and imported textiles.”

Further illustrating his point about perceived value versus sufficiency, Feldman cites a case study involving one of the top entertainment/hospitality enterprises in the world. (He preferred not to mention the company by name, nevertheless, we were all “ears.” – *Jack, the entity, of course, is Disney. I suspect you probably don’t want to use this line, but I couldn’t resist providing it, just in case!*)

“This company has an incredibly large workforce and sky-high labor costs. A cost-benefit analysis revealed that it was better to purchase lower grade aprons for food service and hospitality staff and simply dispose of them after limited use rather than launder, fold and reuse higher-grade, more expensive aprons. The savings in labor, water, chemistry, equipment and energy offset the expense of having to re-order disposable goods. It was cheaper to toss than wash.”

*In our next issue, we will address some of these same topics and more with an expanded panel of industry experts with an accent on laundry operators who made the shift to become vendors.*