

Service Linen: Diversifying for Success in Seattle

Renton, WA-based mixed operation focuses on growing its business in both the F&B and healthcare sectors

By Jason Risley

Service Linen Supply, Renton, WA, began its textile services business with a food-and-beverage (F&B) focus, but made the move to diversify its product lines with outpatient healthcare offerings, while retaining its traditional F&B clientele. With its diverse product lines, the company is reaping the rewards in the greater Seattle and Portland areas since bringing healthcare on board.

MOVE INTO HEALTHCARE

In the mid-'90s, the company decided to expand into the outpatient healthcare market and opened its MediCleanse subsidiary as a result. "We were focused on food and beverage until 1995, and then we decided that we wanted to get into the retail medical business and developed a focus in that area at that point in time," says Bob Raphael, co-president.

Like any major change in an organization, the move had several challenges at the beginning. "We're a systems company—we build systems that we've trained all of our team members to follow," Raphael says. "Now it's become the way we do things. It takes a lot of management. The transition required oversight on Jerry (Fry, vice president of operations) and Janice's (Edmondson, vice president of service) part to get everybody to buy in. It wasn't easy in 1995, especially when medical was a small part of our business, to make sure all the

processes were followed. Now all of our team buys in and understands. It's simple today. We couldn't always say that.

"Early on it was the toughest. Now it's become who we are, and it has professionalized what we do to a greater degree, by going through all the processes in order to get all the certifications, and get the staff to understand what needs to be done properly."

David Jassny, co-president, adds that, "Getting accredited and certified really challenged our team. We had HLAC before there was Hygienically Clean and Clean Green. Once we realized that we could get certified not doing hospital-type work, but doing outpatient healthcare, that made a big difference. Like Bob said, it really professionalized us."

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Looking back nearly 20 years later, the bold move has provided some perspective for the organization. The decision has been a winning one for all areas of the business. "It's been great, because in the healthcare business the requirements are so much greater, and what's happened is the food and beverage has benefited from all the universal precautions and everything else that we have to do for healthcare," Raphael says. "The healthcare has really professionalized the business, and both sides equally benefit."



A view from the mezzanine level of Service Linen Supply's plant in Renton, WA.

STRIVING FOR CERTIFICATIONS

The company is focused on environmentally friendly operations and recently installed a new Pellerin Milnor Corp. PulseFlow® tunnel washer, and has received several awards for water conservation as a result. The company proudly displays all of its awards and certifications at the entrance to its facility in downtown Renton. Fry estimates the company saved 20 million gallons over the course of the year using the new PulseFlow machine.

In addition to the infusion of new environmentally friendly machinery like the PulseFlow tunnel, Service Linen Supply and MediCleanse have invested in several certification programs as well. “We are big believers in certification for healthcare,” Raphael says. “It has been very important, and we think it gives us a tremendous competitive advantage. Clean Green also is important. We find

people are asking a lot more about our environmental initiatives in healthcare. Occasionally, we’ll get a local independent restaurant that’s really into protecting the environment. It is Seattle, after all. But it’s a little more spotty on the food and beverage side. It’s a very big driver in healthcare.”

Fry adds that, “We have such a great outdoors area here with the lakes and rivers. People are very concerned about the environment. Anything we can do to show what we’re doing to help that, they definitely appreciate.”

Jassny thinks Clean Green gives the company a competitive edge in the marketplace. “For some customers it’s in their initiative to use Clean Green-certified businesses,” he says. “It gives us the competitive advantage over somebody else that doesn’t have it.”

TRACKING METRICS

To keep tabs on the efficiency of its operations, Service Linen tracks various numbers associated with different facets of its operation. “We have goals associated with everything in the plant,” Fry says. “We track everything on a usage basis through the plant and equate it to the poundage going through the facility. It’s tracked every single week and graphed so we can see if there’s a spike or a change in anything. That includes all of the natural gas, electricity, water and chemistry. All that’s tracked compared to the poundage. The slightest little blip shows up.”

To aid in its tracking of these important metrics, Service has a Micross system installed in its plant. The software has been operational for the past seven years. “Besides production metrics, it’s (the Micross system) tracking machinery too,” Fry says. “All of the traps on

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– Jerry Fry, vice president of operations

every machine are tracked with the sensors from Micross, and if there’s a trap that’s blowing by, or waterlogged, it will tell us that’s going on. It also alarms us if something gets out of whack. For instance, if we catch heat going out of the sewer or up the boiler stack, if we set parameters, it alarms us if it goes outside of those parameters. It’s being monitored live, so we know immediately if there’s a problem. It could be as simple as one of the sump pumps got something stuck in it and it tripped out on overload, and that stops the regeneration of the water.

“The Micross system also gives operator feedback immediately in colors on how they’re doing on pieces they’re feeding through. We have red, green and blue, and most of the operators now are in blue, which is above standard, there’s a few in green, and the only ones that are in red are new

operators that are training. We get them up to speed real quick.”

The system also has provided quality-control feedback. Jassny says that, “I think the interesting thing about that particular system is we track all the rejects, so we know how many stains and how many tears we have, so we can tell if the operator is doing their job, because if one person is not finding any stains, and another is finding some, then we know somebody is not doing their job. It helps us with our quality.”

The system allows the management team to identify the areas of the plant that are working well. Fry says that, “With the Micross system, we have the ability to drill down. If we have a high stain rate, we can find out if it’s on ivory napkins, or what’s it on? We can track it clear back to the washer load and figure out if there’s one bad load, or if it’s a common thread with

all of that color. We have the ability to get into minute details on stuff moving through the plant.”

The customization options in this software system appealed to the executives at Service Linen. Raphael says that, “What we liked about them is they came in, listened to us, and designed what we really wanted, instead of coming with a package system. We have features that we really liked, and nobody else was tracking.”

LEAN MANUFACTURING

The lean manufacturing process has helped employees at Service Linen take ownership of their individual areas. Called “kaizens,” these projects are designed to foster continuous improvement. They can last anywhere from a few days to a week. “We have gone through the plant section by section and done kaizens, and involved our staff in the process,” Fry says. “We take three or four days and go through a training class and evaluate, take that department, break it down and figure out where the most labor is being spent and how we can reduce that and make it easier for the staff to operate efficiently. We even went so far as to mark down everything in the plant by its proper place. There’s a spot marked for everything.”

At left, long-time employees are recognized with plaques on the mezzanine level of the plant. At right, a sign in the plant touts, “Safety, Quality and Quantity.”





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(clockwise from top) A view of the control center for Service Linen Supply's tunnel washer; garments in motion in the plant; bags of soiled linen move to the soil-sorting area; and garments outfitted with RFID chips pass by RFID tracking equipment.

Raphael adds that, "We've become big devotees of lean manufacturing. Lean has really benefited us by having everybody in the plant understand it, study it and implement the principles."

The kaizens have been a positive for both the company and its employees. "It's cut labor, increased productivity and really has helped our employees own their area," Edmondson says. "They feel that they were a part of the entire decision-making process, so you get good buy in and follow through."

Fry says that, "In the beginning, we thought that we would know what they would decide when they did the kaizens, but after going through the process, there were several areas that we were surprised because it was different than the outcome we had figured. But it works. They put their heads together and did a good job."

Raphael adds that, "Some of them have been great ideas. They see things that we don't see, and it's really helped the company."

With a focus on better business practices through certifications, equipment upgrades and top-notch operating procedures that help to engage its work force, Service Linen Supply and its MediCleanse healthcare subsidiary is navigating the divide between F&B and healthcare laundering and poised for future growth as a result. **TS**

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