

Wetcleaning Gains Appeal with Drycleaners



By Haley Jorgensen

Drycleaners are emerging as an untapped niche for industrial laundry equipment manufacturers and their distributors. A growing percentage of items funneled through progressive drycleaning facilities are now wetcleaned—often with superior results over traditional methods.

The industry is searching for safe cleaning alternatives, having been hammered in recent years by environmental regulations surrounding the use of cancer-causing perchloreoethylene (perc), rising insurance premiums and increasing labor costs, according to Mike Szczotka (Stucky) of Eagle Star Equipment, in Detroit. Szczotka has served the laundry and drycleaning industries for 16 years, providing equipment, parts, service and training to his network of repeat customers.

Among those he serves is Wayne Wudyka, chief operating officer and co-founder of Certified Restoration Drycleaning Network (CRDN), an

international organization of drycleaners which specialize in restoration work following floods, fires and other disasters. CRDN facilities work closely with insurers to restore damaged items from homes and businesses—saving them around 84 percent over the cost of replacement, according to Wudyka.

The big surprise is that the lion's share—60 percent—of CRDN's restoration volume is wetcleaned. "Wetcleaning is more effective than drycleaning on heavy-odor losses and removing contaminants," says Wudyka. CRDN facilities, not only inventory, track, clean and store items until they can be returned to homes and businesses, they guarantee restoration or your money back. Since 2001, Eagle Star Equipment has outfitted many CRDN facilities nationally with Continental washer-extractors, drying tumblers and flatwork ironers, along with a variety of drycleaning equipment.

Wetcleaning is appealing to drycleaners, according to Szczotka, because it's a more profitable, safe and effective cleaning

method. "There's new chemistry out there that allows us to wetclean an Armani suit," he says. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) concurs.

"Properly trained professional cleaners are now able to successfully wetclean most garments that are typically drycleaned," according to an EPA report, including silks, wools, linens, suedes and leathers. The key to effective cleaning, according to Szczotka and Wudyka, is highly programmable laundry equipment with appropriate detergent and chemical combinations.

"The name of the game is having programmable equipment, being able to modify cycles and using proper chemistry at the right water temperature," says Szczotka. "We can control all of that with Continental products."

Chemical representatives who work with drycleaners can properly program Continental equipment for a myriad of items—wool sweaters, silks and suits—using a variety of effective chemicals for superior results, according to Szczotka.

For Wudyka, soft-mount machines with high extract are also critical to productivity and plant flexibility. In 13 years, Eagle Star Equipment redesigned Huntington Cleaners—Wudyka's flagship CRDN facility located in Detroit—five times. "Every piece of equipment came from Mike," Wudyka says. "He's very proactive in terms of plant design to facilitate our growth. Otherwise our growth would have been limited." Thanks to Continental's soft-mount washer design, maximizing production and relocating machines was simplified. "We're constantly challenged with reconfiguring space," says Wudyka. "I like

the softmount so we aren't digging foundations. The additional extract cuts dry time down, which is also key."

Gaining more profit is another benefit of wetcleaning over drycleaning, says Szczotka. "It's less labor and double the money to do a Polo shirt," he maintains. And new tensioning equipment makes finishing wetcleaned items—suits, pants, shirts—less time consuming. But for drycleaners who use perc, compliance with a myriad of federal regulations can drain profits by impacting the following:

- liability insurance
- permitting fees

- hazardous waste disposal fees
- equipment upgrades
- contaminated site clean up
- time spent learning and complying with regulations

New cleaning solutions are the wave of the future for the drycleaning industry, says Szczotka. Thanks to new chemicals, highly programmable equipment and new finishing technologies, wetcleaning will continue to gain favor with drycleaners interested in boosting profits.

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The Birth of CRDN

Wayne Wyduka entered the drycleaning business as an investor—a businessman looking for opportunity. "He answered one of my turnkey ads," says Mike (Stucky) Szczotka, president of Eagle Star Equipment, a distributor of drycleaning and laundry equipment in Detroit. "I introduced he and his partner, Jeff Snyder, to Huntington Cleaners."

A business relationship formed and grew over several years as Szczotka shared his expertise related to the drycleaning industry with Snyder and Wyduka. Huntington Cleaners has since grown from a 2,200- to a 13,000-square-foot facility. In 2001, Wyduka formed the Certified Restoration Drycleaning Network (CRDN), an international organization of drycleaners, which specialize in restoration work following floods, fires and other disasters. Sixty percent of a typical CRDN facility's volume is restored via wetcleaning; not drycleaning.

In just four years, more than 100 CRDN operations have emerged in the United States. In just three years, Szczotka has outfitted many of them with

Continental equipment. Most recently, Szczotka equipped a facility with three 90-pound and two 55-pound Pro-Series washers, a 75-pound and three 30-pound stack dryers, and one flatwork ironer. "That's a nice little pop," he admits. CRDN has become one of Szczotka's best clients.

"Restoration drycleaning is an untapped niche of busi-

ness," says Wyduka. "It's a wide open field that's more exciting than anything in laundry and drycleaning. CRDN is designed to get drycleaners under one brand and to market that brand to the insurance companies. We're the only national group out there."

Szczotka credits Wyduka for educating the insurance industry to the benefits of restora-

tion drycleaning. Wyduka, in turns, credits Szczotka for properly equipping and servicing his businesses. "We buy anything Mike tells us to buy," he says.

By helping to better Huntington Cleaners, Szczotka maintains he's boosted his own business to new levels; and gained a friend in the process.



Left to Right: Jeff Schnieder of Huntington Cleaners; Mike Szczotka of Eagle Star; Laurie Murdock and Rob Hellier, both of Huntington Cleaners; and Jeff Quail of Eagle Star.