



# FINISH STRONG

(Photo: ©iStockphoto/mattieacock)

***Today's tensioning and up-air equipment  
now have a smaller footprint, are easier to operate,  
and can save on costs — and that's not all!***

By Tim Burke, Editor

**“W**e are seeing consistent growth in demand for equipment that is easy to use and produces high-quality finished garments,” says Wes Nelson, vice president of sales and chief operating officer at Elk Grove Village, Ill.-based Sankosha USA, a manufacturer of tensioning equipment for the drycleaning industry.

“Demand,” he adds, “for both semi- and automatic bagging equipment continues to grow.”

Finishing equipment, like other segments of the drycleaning process, is going through a metamorphosis. The shift to casual styles in our world is partly the reason. But it has to do with the need to reduce labor costs as well.

“Tensioning equipment is now seen as the most efficient way to finish ‘relaxed style’ garments,” says Nelson.

About these relaxed styles, Tom Stites, sales manager at finishing equipment (continued)



manufacturer Unipress in Tampa, Fla., says, “A shift in styles to a more relaxed look is a major concern to the industry, as a whole. In my opinion, we are a service industry that has prospered by offering a service that can’t be duplicated in a home laundry.”

By training consumers to accept less than a true professional cleaning and finishing, this makes it easier for the garment industry to achieve these results at home, he says. “We must maintain high quality standards to protect our industry.”

Quality is always important. It’s tops on the list. But there’s always the issue of cost and that drives innovation. You may already feel that you need to upgrade your finishing equipment.

Many manufacturers hear from store operators about this topic.

“The need to upgrade or replace shirt finishing equipment,” Nelson indicates, “continues to be the dry cleaner’s No. 1 priority.”

Yuriko Tanabe, vice president for Secaucus, N.J.-

based European Finishing Equipment, which sells European-style finishing equipment under the Hi-Steam brand, says that many of her drycleaning customers “ask for less expensive, smaller, high-production shirt finishers.”

Automation is a keyword in finishing today. With it, drycleaning owners can more quickly train their operators to use more efficient machines to produce higher-quality finished garments at a lower cost.

Tanabe sees this: “Cleaners will look for more automation, less hand-finishing, (and) smaller, simpler and high-production finishing machines that are energy-efficient to create the cooler work environment.”

The ultimate outcome all dry cleaners seek is a high-quality finished garment to satisfy customers. Dry cleaners look at finishing equipment to help them get there.

“Overcoming fear of new technology,” Tanabe says, is one of the challenges in the industry today. “Once the cleaners discover that tensioning equipment is easy to operate and produces a fine finish, they change their minds.”

“Up-air boards are for those cleaners who are very particular and serious about producing a beautiful finish on fine garments. For other cleaners, vacuum boards will produce a good finish on most garments,” she adds.

#### **AUTOMATE OPERATE**

Other obvious challenges come with automating the finishing process. Employees need to be properly trained on tensioning equipment, and the finishing process itself needs to run efficiently.

“The big challenge is to educate the dry cleaner to forget the traditional ways that they have worked in the past,” insists John Harper, director of sales, pressing and finishing division of Denver, N.C.-based finishing equipment maker Leonard Automatics.

“(Dry cleaners) need to look at what can be done with automated machinery and think of it as a system to finish a garment,” he says. “They need to understand that no automated machine will do 100% of a job all the time.”

“The use of tensioning machinery in conjunction with vacuum/up-air tables will increase production which in turn will give (the owner) a good return on investment,” says Harper.

Styles are more relaxed in today’s society but quality never fades.

Speed in production is also vital, which Harper points out: “Using modern systems such as tensioning machines, up-air blowing tables as well as tunnel finishers finishes all types of garments (using) faster production with semi-skilled labor.”

Your workforce is a big part of the

*(continued)*



**Nothing but Blue Sky! Richard Reese (left), West Coast sales manager of Unipress, poses with Sheldon Bray, general manager of Seattle-based Blue Sky Cleaners, in front of the Unipress shirt tensioner in the Blue Sky plant.**

*(Photo: Unipress)*



picture today, so training on automated equipment, or any equipment for that matter, is important to safely maintain the level of high-quality finishing the customer has come to expect from your business.

"Automation is the only way to stay competitive in this business," says Harper. "As labor rates continue to increase, dry cleaners have to find ways to decrease labor content yet maintain or improve productivity and quality."

He indicates that investing in automated machines can easily be justified when an operator reduces direct labor by 35-50% and then the operator can teach their employees to be loaders.

With automation becoming more of an option and a daily discussion topic among dry cleaners, can it be stated that any employee may be able to be trained to operate these machines?

Stuart Ilkowitz, president of garment pressing equipment manufacturer Trevil America, Mamaroneck, N.Y., says, "The operations of many machines are very similar, which allows for the cross-training of operators; the same person who can operate a shirt unit can also operate a pants finishing machine."

He notes that his company recently introduced a pants finishing machine to the United States. "An operator who has never pressed pants before can be taught very quickly how to operate a pants presser machine and produce 35-40 pair of pants per hour."

The Trevil machine operates like a tensioning pants topper. After that cycle is completed, instead of going to a legger press, the top mechanism raises up and a vacuum panel moves forward, he notes. The operator simply has to clip the pants in position to line up the creases and then push two buttons to close the vertical presses.

"Very simple, very easy to operate," Ilkowitz says, "and does not require an experienced operator."

"Dry cleaners today are more in tune with labor issues, which is why we see the market moving more and more in the direction of equipment that is designed to simplify the job and reduce the level of skill needed by the operator," he adds.

## **FUTURECAST**

*American Drycleaner* asked some of these industry experts where they see the tensioning and up-air equipment market headed in the near future.

"Our industry is becoming more progressive in areas of efficiency and (being) energy-conscious, while focusing on improving customer service," Nelson says.

Before deciding if tensioning equipment is right for any plant, it is crucial that the owner and plant manager have a good understanding of their current production



**Donna at Work! This Sankosha tensioning topper at Troy, Mich.-based Carrington Cleaners is being operated by employee Donna Brimm. Tensioning cuff function and a powerful blower motor produces optimal finishing and fast drying on pants.**  
(Photo: Sankosha)

and quality levels, indicates Stites.

"Without this information, it will be next to impossible to evaluate the ultimate success of the investment. Converting to tensioning equipment typically increases production between 10 to 15%," he says.

"One hidden advantage of increased production is being able to shut the boiler down earlier in the day, lowering utility costs. Shutting down the boiler 30 minutes earlier each day could save between 5-6% on gas or oil bills each month and that goes directly to the bottom line," he adds.

What are the biggest changes going on? And how best can dry cleaners move forward to get the best bang for their buck—or double buck, as the case may be?

"What is new," says Tanabe, "is the high-production, inexpensive shirt finisher, and self-contained pressing equipment."

In regard to growth, she indicates that dry cleaners need to embrace new technology to automate time-consuming tasks.

"Those include using a blouse-tensioning (continued)



machine, instead of a hand-iron or on a lay-down,” Tanabe says. “Just as cars, washing machines and dishwashers changed our lives, automation will improve the lives of dry cleaners.”

Harper sees this: “As the economy is coming back slowly, the market will be going in the direction of small, 300-500-pound-a-day package stores.”

There’s a shift in labor, Ilkowitz indicates, as machines make it easy for an operator to learn and excel at pressing.

“Essentially, we are reducing the ‘skill’ level needed for the operator and putting it into the machine,” he says. “The operator essentially just has to load and unload the machine.”

Ilkowitz advises that rather than “simply looking at tensioning equipment the way it was looked at 10-20 years ago, today’s dry cleaners need to look further to understand how the machines can help them reduce labor costs, increase quality, and maintain or improve productivity.”

Tensioning-style finishing equipment was first developed to work in conjunction with the wetcleaning process, reflects Stites.

“Garments that were wet-cleaned presented a unique set of challenges when finished on conventional-style finishing equipment. Shrinkage and heat-set wrinkles were two of the main issues that were routinely encountered.”

The basic concept of tensioning equipment hasn’t changed drastically over the years, he says. “A major emphasis has been placed on making the units more user-friendly, requiring less training while enhancing quality



**Sharp Set Of Threads! At Meurice Garment Care of New York, this entire pair of pants, including the crease, is finished on one machine, the Trevil Pantastar, without the need for a highly experienced operator. Reesie is the employee taking care of business.** (Photo: Trevil America)

and improving production.”

This has created an opportunity for tensioning equipment to grow and expand beyond wet cleaning and be used with more traditional solvents because of the advantages in production and quality, Stites says.

Simpler training for employees and the flexibility to quickly learn how to use the equipment in a cost-saving way is where we find ourselves today.

At the end of the cleaning operation, after the garments have been cleaned, you want efficiency and high quality — you want to finish strong and impress your customers and keep them coming back.

The equipment opportunities in the industry keep getting better.

“We are bullish for the future,” says Nelson.

ADC



**Strong Finish! This Hi-Steam multi-garment finisher is in operation at Nor'east Cleaners in Gloucester, Mass.** (Photo: European Finishing Equipment)