

# Luxury on the Line: Managing The Move to High-End Linens

*Practical steps for achieving  
high-quality finishing of hotel linens*



**By Pam Simonetti and Joe Gudenburr**

**I**t's official: When it comes to hospitality bedding, luxury is the new buzzword. Plush bedding, once the exclusive domain of luxury hotels, has made huge inroads throughout the lodging industry. Looking back, the first salvo in the industry's Bed Wars was fired by the Westin chain in 1999. Their Heavenly Bed ignited an upgrading frenzy that is still going strong today.

These days, you're nearly as likely to find pillow-top mattresses

adorned with California kings, triple sheeting, duvets and fluffy comforters at mid-priced hotels as at high-end boutiques.

Clearly, comfortable bedding is the new battlefield in the ongoing war for hospitality market share. And while all this luxury has certainly helped the players win new customers, many of their laundry departments are experiencing king-size headaches.

Why?

Many laundry departments simply lack the capacity, equipment or manpower needed to efficiently handle either the influx of linens and pillowcases with T250 (or higher) thread counts, or the greater volume of sheets brought on by the triple-sheeting trend.

In many cases, hotel management needed to adjust quickly to market conditions, so that laundry and housekeeping departments could only be reactive, rather than proactive. In some instances, laundry managers found themselves scurrying to make line adjustments virtually overnight. The resulting quick fixes incurred new costs in the form of new equipment, more training, slower processing times and poorer output quality. Add to that the increased costs associated with carrying additional inventory to service accounts due to these inefficiencies. Also, laundries that lacked the right equipment to handle certain linens were burdened with higher outsourcing bills.

Because the luxury linen issue is a complex challenge with no single solution, laundry managers faced some difficult and costly

## Linen Processing



*Managing today's high volume of high-end linens has required companies to pursue tactics such as outsourcing production and adding machinery. The good news is that many modern finishing systems require minimal training and offer standard features such as user-friendly feeder clips, ergonomically designed feeding stations and more.*

save time on the finishing end, the savings are largely offset by higher natural gas costs.

As more hotels gravitate toward the California king sizes, processing linens larger than the standard 120-inch size poses its own set of issues. Many laundries have finishing equipment that can't accommodate the larger size, while managing a high level of quality and productivity. They are overcoming this problem either by purchasing more flexible machinery specifically designed to handle the 130-inch

choices. Higher volumes, lower productivity, higher thread counts, larger linens and more contoured sheets all required their own unique solutions. Has the industry found the perfect balance between quality and efficiency? It's certainly getting there.

### **Luxury sheets—higher problem count**

The most complex and urgent issue is how to deal with high thread count. Laundries were finding that sheets with counts as high as T250 could take twice as long to process, literally cutting line productivity in half. Some operations simply built additional time into their original schedules. Others added extra shifts. Still others put the linens through a conditioning process to remove much of the excess moisture from the linens. But although this process may

linens, or by outsourcing this size at a higher incremental cost.

Contoured sheets present a double challenge. First, many facilities can't handle them at all and must outsource or buy new equipment—similar to the California king dilemma. Second, those that have the right equipment will generally need to slow the line down to ensure a solid quality output and eliminate damage to the goods. Many facilities have reduced the number of sheets on the stacker because the stack tends to topple if it gets too high.

### **New equipment and other innovations**

Eliminating linen damage and ensuring the quality results that guests expect can be a major challenge with the new bedding packages. One of the keys to consistently high-quality output lies in the feeding of the linen into the finishing equipment. The closer the operator gets to a perfect edge heading into the feeder, the greater

the likelihood that the wrinkles are ironed out, not in. A combination of clips for the corners of the leading edge, plus a blast of air helps ensure a flat, straight edge that will produce perfectly folded and presented linens very efficiently.

While some facilities handle the high volume of laundry by adding more shifts, others have added more ironers and spreader/feeders. Fortunately, many of the newer machines require minimal training and have such standard features as easy-to-use feeder clips, ergonomically friendly feeding stations, automatic operator efficiency counts and multi-lingual user prompts.

Jim Morris, general manager of laundry operations for Marriott Textile Services in Edison, NJ, gives high marks to G.A. Braun Inc., Syracuse, NY, for helping his company meet the challenge of the market shift. "They helped me find a flexible solution that kept my line running with just minor equipment adjustments," he said.

So, while the introduction of luxury linens has caused problems aplenty for launderers, there are many solutions. Some are simple equipment fixes, such as installing more drives and rollers to finishing equipment. Another simple solution enlists the guests as partners. It's what many hoteliers call "Green Rooms." The check-in clerk asks the guests whether or not they want their linens laundered each day. A surprising number of short-term guests have opted to keep the same linens, making a significant dent in the hotel laundry's volume challenge. Similarly, some hotels cite the advantages of energy and water conservation and ask guests to leave on the bathroom floor those towels and washcloths they wish to have replaced that day—the rest are not collected.

### Put management in the picture

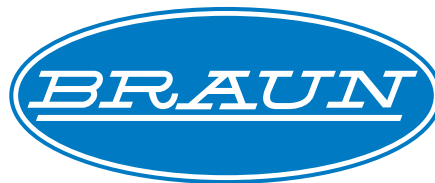
Finally, a word of advice for those who find yourselves in the crosshairs of the linen upgrade frenzy: Talk to management. Detail the economic constraints new linens can have on your line. Explain the potential productivity nightmares as well as the potential damage to the goods. Also, calculate your processing capacity before an investment is made. Ask for samples of the goods you're considering so you can have them tested.

Most importantly, if you're investing in new textile finishing equipment, choose a laundry manufacturer that can accommodate both 120- and 130-inch linens. In order to minimize service delays and downtime, laundry managers should select a manufacturer that has standardized parts (and plenty of them) available domestically and at all times. And, considering the potential pitfalls you may face

in the coming months, find someone who makes customer service a priority. **TR**



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