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AMERICAN drycleaner

Water, Fire And Flood

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Published 01/01/2008 - 4:34 p.m. CT

Drycleaners are emerging as a niche for industrial laundry-equipment manufacturers and distributors, since a growing percentage of items funneled through progressive plants are now wetcleaned — often with superior results.

The industry is searching for safer cleaning alternatives, having been hammered by environmental regulations on the use of perchloroethylene, rising insurance premiums and increasing labor costs, says Mike (Stucky) Szczotka of Eagle Star Equipment in Troy, Mich.



Among Eagle Star's customers is Huntington Cleaners in nearby Huntington Woods, Mich., the launching pad for the Certified Restoration Drycleaning Network (CRDN), an international organization of drycleaners specializing in restoration work after floods, fires and other disasters. CRDN works with insurers to restore damaged items from homes and businesses, saving about 84% over full replacement costs.

Surprisingly, CRDN does the lion's share — 60% — of restoration work using professional wetcleaning techniques. "Wetcleaning is more effective than drycleaning on heavy odors and removing contaminants," says Wayne Wudyka, cofounder and COO.

CRDN affiliates inventory, track, clean and store items until they can be returned to damaged homes and businesses, offering a money-back guarantee on their work. Since Szczotka introduced Wudyka and his business partner, Jeff Snyder, Eagle Star has outfitted Huntington and other CRDN affiliates with high-performance, soft-mount washer-extractors, drying tumblers and flatwork ironers, along with a variety of drycleaning equipment.

Wetcleaning appeals to drycleaners because it's a safe, effective and profitable alternative to solvent processes. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) concurs. "Properly trained, professional cleaners are now able to successfully wetclean most garments that are typically drycleaned," an EPA report says.

The key to effective cleaning is programmable laundry equipment and the appropriate detergents and

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

Chemical distributors work with drycleaners to program washers for many items — wool sweaters, silks and more — using a variety of chemicals for superior results, Szczotka says. “There’s new chemistry out there that allows us to wetclean an Armani suit.”

Huntington has grown from a 2,200-sq.-ft. storefront to a 13,000-sq.-ft. facility since spearheading CRDN, and Eagle Star has redesigned its plant five times in 13 years to accommodate the growth. “Every piece of equipment came from Mike,” Wudyka says. “He’s very proactive in terms of plant design to facilitate our growth. Otherwise, growth would have been limited. We buy anything Mike tells us to buy.”

At Huntington, Szczotka recommended soft-mount, high-speed washer-extractors from Continental Girbau for productivity and flexibility. Thanks to the soft-mount design, Wudyka says, maximizing production and relocating machines was simple.

“We’re constantly challenged with reconfiguring space,” he says. “I like the soft-mount, so we aren’t digging foundations. The additional extract cuts drying times down, which is also key.”

New profits are another benefit of wetcleaning, Szczotka adds. “It’s less labor and double the money to do a polo shirt,” he says. And new tensioning finishing equipment makes finishing wetcleaned items — traditionally a problem on structured items such as suits — less time-consuming.

For drycleaners who use perc, achieving compliance can drain profits by inflating costs for liability insurance, permitting fees, hazardous-waste fees and equipment upgrades. And even if your operation never faces the possibility of contamination cleanup, it costs valuable time to learn the regulations and achieve compliance.

That’s why so many new solutions are being introduced in the drycleaning industry, Szczotka says. And thanks to new chemicals, programmable laundry equipment and new finishing technologies, wetcleaning will continue to gain favor with drycleaners interested in boosting profits.