

Around Midnight

New York's Midnight Express used its new industrial washer and ironer setup to target high-volume users and quadruple sales.

By Haley Jorgensen

Seeking to develop new revenue streams, New York drycleaner Midnight Express went not to the "small" end of the market with a coin-op laundry, but to the industrial market. The company spurred fast growth by installing a high-capacity washer-extractor and industrial-sized ironer.

That laundry equipment, made by Oshkosh, Wis.-based Continental Girbau, helped Midnight capture a major-user market and quadruple its sales in just two years. "The equipment has offered us a growth factor we couldn't ordinarily have," says Midnight Express manager Bert Abbey. Even as a longtime consultant, he has never "had a hand in anything quite this exciting."

A 12-year-old company owned by Robert Drucker, Midnight Express now supplies high-grade valet and laundry service to catering companies, fashion designers, healthcare markets, chil-

dren's centers, health clubs and more. Every day, nearly 10,000 lbs. of laundry pass through the company's 7,000-sq.-ft., 14-person plant.

The company serves individual customers, too, with pick-up and delivery to apartment complexes and businesses, and specializes in cleaning fire-, smoke- and water-damaged items associated with insurance claims. Midnight Express' drycleaning business is also picking up, Abbey says, "just because the laundry side is doing so well."

To go after the major-user market, Abbey knew he had to make things run more efficiently in-house. "We had three or four [big accounts] before, but were struggling with them because we didn't have the machines to service them properly," Abbey says. "Without the technology, you just can't do it."

That's when he began the search for technologically advanced laundry equipment that could handle the ▶



Midnight Express manager Bert Abbey says it was a struggle to service major clients before adding new equipment from Continental Girbau.

high volume while saving labor, time and utilities. Since installing the Continental equipment, Midnight Express has added more than 40 major users as clients.

THE RIGHT STUFF. Joe Carlucci of Hercules Machinery, a Continental distributor in Island Park, N.Y., suggested that Midnight Express might benefit from a 255-lb. Continental Pro-Series washer-extractor that was programmable to clean a variety of jobs. He also recommended and installed the Pro-Series Ironing System, a 125-inch finisher with automatic folding capabilities.

The machines provided a perfect complement to the company's smaller drying tumblers, Pony washers and Columbia dry-cleaning machine. "The 255-lb. machine gave us more production than we needed, but tons of growth capacity," Abbey says.

That's what Abbey wanted—room to grow within the space the plant already offered. Continental's washer-extractor was easy to install, Carlucci says, because it fit the existing space, saving money, and didn't have to be bolted to a permanent foundation.

The soft-mount design helps the machine reach extraction speeds of up to 387 Gs—leaving garments and other linens up to 70% drier than a traditional hard-mount machine. This cuts drying times and utility costs, Abbey says. While business has quadrupled, natural-gas usage has only increased 30%.

The washer-extractor features programmable controls that are easy to operate and customize. "It's given us the ability to fine-tune services, because of computer operations that use different chemicals, water temperatures and cycles," Abbey says. "The same machine will do high-class clothing, enzyme washes, stone washes and bleaches by using preset computer operations."

Now, Midnight Express is taking on large volumes of laundry for a variety of clients, including many of the fashion designers located along New York's "Fashion Avenue." The company preps fabric before it's made into designer clothing. "We prewash jeans to give a faded look," Abbey says. "The Continental [unit] can be set to create a stonewashed look, without using stones. It's done chemically, and it's environmentally sound."

The machine can also be programmed to clean for the healthcare industry. Using the proper mix of chemicals, bleach and water temperatures, it ensures that the company meets Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) requirements for handling laundry exposed to bloodborne pathogens and communicable diseases. The same requirements hold true for servicing childcare centers and health clubs. In fact, Abbey says, the machine makes it easy to abide by OSHA standards completely.

Running the washer-extractor is simple, he adds. Midnight Express has posters on the machine with a listing of its customers and corresponding numbers. Attendants press the customer number and the washer automatically selects the correct cycle. In addition, it's equipped with a delayed-start feature that can be programmed to process a load of laundry before the plant opens.

"The Continental takes on 50% to 60% of our capacity," Abbey says, "and we use it for the high-volume, high-tech work that gives us the most profit."

Midnight Express' new ironer has also had a big impact on sales. Once installed, Abbey went after high-end caterers—something he couldn't have done before. Major users now account for 30% of revenues.

With minimal labor—three employ- ▶

ees—the company irons 5,000 napkins a day, along with 100 tablecloths and table skirts. Linens go straight from the washer-extractor into the finisher, where they're ironed and folded automatically. They don't need to be dried first, Abbey says, saving more time and money.

These savings are passed on to clients, making Midnight Express' prices competitive. "We can do it for less because we don't do it by hand," Abbey says.

The finisher also has programmable controls that automatically increase or decrease cylinder speeds according to linen type and moisture content. And the unit's chrome finishing cylinder doesn't need wax, saving more time and labor, and eliminating the possibility of wax getting onto flat goods.

HAPPY RETURNS. The new equipment is worth the money, Abbey says, and Midnight Express' payback time was phenomenal—the ironer paid for itself in two weeks, and the washer-extractor in three months. From now on, whatever the units process is almost all profit, since they are backed by one of the best factory warranties in the industry.

Once the machines were installed, there was no need to drum up business—word spread. And Midnight Express already had a reputation for the best product and service in the area, Abbey says. "Midnight is aggressive when it comes to servicing our clients."

The company just needed the right equipment for the job. "I couldn't sell what I couldn't produce," he says. "Once we had the equipment and knew we could handle the load, nothing could stop us." ○

Haley Jorgensen is a freelance writer based in Ripon, Wis. For more information about Midnight Express, visit www.osha.com; for more on Continental Girbau's complete line of equipment for commercial and industrial laundry applications, visit www.cont-girbau.com.