DRYCLEANERS NEWS®

Reprinted with permission from the February 2009 issue

Automation Offers Efficiency And Consistency

By Angela Beniwal

Dave Mering compares the impact of automation on the drycleaning industry to when point-of-sale (POS) computer systems were first introduced. Both have dramatically changed business owners' ability to manage workflow, and improve efficiency and output.

"The idea of getting that kind of database and being able to manage the database was a huge step forward for the drycleaning industry, and I think that automation is the same kind of step forward," he says.

Mering has owned and operated Nor'East Cleaners in Boston for 21 years, and he has used the automated drycleaning assembly conveyor (ADAC) from HMC Solutions for about a year. He says this conveyor system has changed his business for the better by reducing labor and increasing accuracy.

"There's a tremendous advantage in dealing with customers, and it demonstrates to the customers a level of expertise that they find surprising," he notes.

Mering goes on to say that HMC's ADAC gives him the kind information that allows his business to process clothes correctly and with consistency.

"You can personalize service, and you don't even have to ask the customer the next time," he explains. "Once you get in the information, it will be there forever."

For example, if a customer likes his or her clothes processed in a specific way, this information can be entered into the computer. That way, employees will be aware of the request without having to ask the customer every time he or she comes to the store.

White Conveyors has introduced a smaller conveyor system called the Pegasus.

"If the front person is not entirely on top of it, the computer and the barcode will tell you that information," he explains. "That's huge, because it gives us a consistency and quality that you just can't get any other way."

Accuracy and consistency can go a long way in making sure customers don't jump ship to a competitor – especially in this fragile economy.

"Even if it eliminates half a person, the efficiency of the operation is greater, and you're preventing the loss [that results from] mismatched pieces and putting in the wrong order," says Paul Mullen, vice president of sales for White Conveyors Inc.

Every drycleaning business is different, and Bill Odorizzi, vice president of Sankosha USA, says that reducing the number of employees might be easier – depending on the situation – at larger operations because the loss may not affect the quality of the product as much.

"On the other hand, in some of the medium and smaller type operations – which make up a lot of our industry today – better use of personnel is something that ends up being more productive and more beneficial to the bottom line," he notes.

Businesses don't necessarily have to eliminate workers after incorporating assembly conveyors or barcoding. Those individuals who used to assemble orders can devote their time to finishing or packaging, therefore improving a drycleaner's end product.

"In general, what you're looking to do is to reduce the number of people it takes to assemble manually by using some form of automation," says Dale Brown, sales manager at HMC Solutions. "In doing the automation, you still want to have control over the quality of the order."

But some drycleaners are uneasy about using a complicated piece of machinery. Mering says he initially worried how his staff would adjust to HMC's ADAC.

"I was surprised at how quickly people adapted to it," he says. "I think, in part, that's because people are used to barcodes in stores and on garments. In retail stores, so much is done with barcodes now that [workers'] apprehension about it has diminished."

Other drycleaners are reluctant to purchase conveyors because they are afraid of the expense and the time it will take for installation. But those in the industry say that assembly conveyors are not as expensive as drycleaners might think because the payback in labor savings is so dramatic.

Smaller conveyors

So that more drycleaners are able to reap the benefits of an automated assembly conveyor system, White Conveyors has introduced the Pegasus. The Mercury conveyor is a well-known White product that is designed for larger businesses with higher volume.

But now, small to medium-size drycleaners – which make up the bulk of the industry – will be able utilize the smaller Pegasus conveyor system.

"What we have realized over time is that there is a large grouping of drycleaners who are still dedicating one or two people per day to assembly, but their volumes and their pocketbooks don't necessarily match up with the high cost of an automated system," explains Mullen. "Now is a time that people are going to be watching the pennies, the nickels and the quarters far closer, because they're seeing their revenue drop."

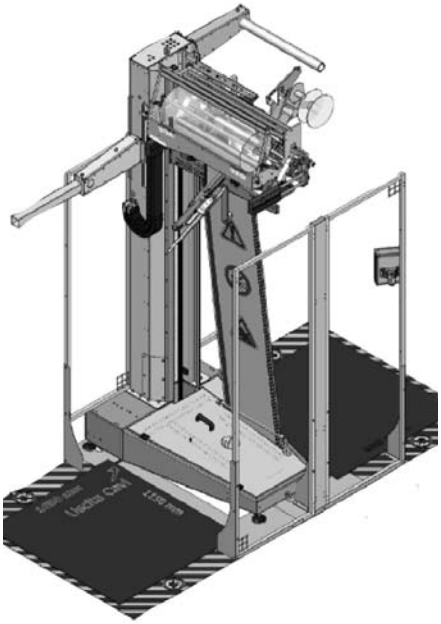
Software for the Pegasus and Mercury is virtually the same, and Dell computers with touchscreens are utilized for the user interface. The smaller conveyor has the same, heavy-duty backbone as the larger Mercury, according to Mullen.

He adds that White has worked with several POS companies so that integration is simple. All drycleaners have to do is to contact their POS provider and tell them that they are using the Pegasus. White, in conjunction with the POS companies, remotely set up the machines, so drycleaners can get to work right away.

"It's utilizing all the technology that we've already developed in sorting for the Mercury and the Compu-Sort," he notes. "It's a mature, new product. It's using our technology in a different manner to bring a cost-effective product to the market."

Mullen says there are pre-orders for the Pegasus, and the first piece of equipment was scheduled to be installed in January in North Carolina.

"I believe it's time that we take full advantage of the computer age and bring that to the drycleaner – and also bring them the convenience," he says. "The price point on the machine is very attractive, and if [drycleaners] are in a situation where they can eliminate one assembly person, the payback – against typical payroll numbers that we see throughout the country – is below a year."



Metalprogetti offers an automatic bagger.

Easy installation is another beneficial feature of the Pegasus. Unlike larger automated conveyors, which require people to come to a plant and, in some cases, shut the business down for a while in order to install it, the Pegasus is different. Its smaller size means that within two to four hours, a couple of people can get the conveyor up and running.

"This system is going out the door completely assembled, and all the operator or drycleaner has to do is jack it up on the supports, plug it into the wall, hook up the computer, get a live Internet connection and then call into our offices – and we'll do the balance of start-up remotely," says Mullen.

The ease of installation can save the drycleaner time and money.

"What we're trying to do here – because of the expense of travel and the expense of paying for the installation – is to come up with a very cost-effective solution for the drycleaner in what we see are obviously challenging economic times," he adds.

The Pegasus can also be purchased with castors so that it is essentially portable. This is a plus, because space is a big concern for many drycleaners. Mullen says that the company will eventually stock the smaller conveyors so that they are ready for delivery. The amount of stock will depend on demand for the product.

Mullen says that the reason behind the creation of the smaller conveyor is simple: White Conveyors is successful because of drycleaners.

"The way we look at it is, we've got to get something back out there that helps the guys who have put money in our pockets over the years," he says.

Reducing labor

Iowa Techniques also sells smaller conveyor systems in 10-foot, 14-foot or 18-foot sizes. Matt Kool, president of the company, says that many drycleaners have recently expressed interest in his product.

"Right now, people are looking for anything that can save labor," he notes. "A system that they can install and that reduces the amount of labor hours that are associated with assembly – and pays for itself in less than a year – yes, they are very interested in that."

Kool says that his company's conveyors interface with most POS systems. The software that comes with the conveyors act more like an inventory management system, even though it does run parallel to the POS systems.

Conveyors from Iowa Techniques are more affordable for a wider range of drycleaners, says Kool.

"We developed a system that targets the mom-and-pop cleaner, not necessarily the large business," he notes.

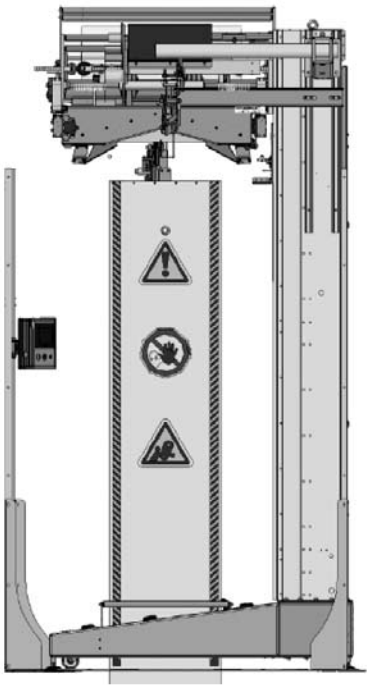
Like other assembly conveyors, the products from Iowa Techniques can also save drycleaners money by reducing the amount of labor that is needed.

"They can still benefit from having a system that reduces their labor

footprint to one person," says Kool. "In a lot of situations, that same person who is doing assembly can also be utilized for inspection and for bagging. In theory, you can eliminate two – possibly three – people."

But Kool says this depends on how well a particular business is managed. For example, if a shop has only one person performing assembly, inspection and bagging duties, payback might not be as noticeable.

However, "if they have inefficiency in the assembly process and they can take out two people, all of a sudden it's very lucrative for them to do this," he explains. "The burden and the time for installation is where most people are reluctant."



Metalprogetti's new automatic bagger has a labeling device.

Phil Cote of French Cleaners in Connecticut runs a very streamlined and efficient business, thanks to automation. He acknowledges that automatic assembly conveyors, along with permanent barcoding, can be expensive, but the payback is worth it.

"All of your expenses are cheap compared to labor – even equipment," he says. "Any equipment that you can buy that reduces labor is worth it."

In addition to eliminating workers, the ones that you do keep don't have to be as skilled when using automated assembly conveyors, and as a result, the pay rate for these workers can decrease, says Brown.

"In assembly, not only do you reduce the skill factor, but you also reduce the head count – that's a big difference there," he notes.

The benchmark that HMC uses is that one person can do 2,500 pieces of assembly in an eight-hour day on one unit. That number goes down if a business does a tremendous amount of packaging or unique hand finishing, in which case, the number might be 1,800 to 2,000 pieces per eight-hour day.

But if a business launders more shirts than it drycleans, then the number goes beyond 2,500. That's because barcodes are usually located in the same place on shirts, whereas tags on drycleaning items – like women's sweaters or dresses – are not always placed in the same area.

Cote utilizes permanent barcodes for all of the laundered shirts that come into French Cleaners.

"With the shirt laundry, it's been great, because we've basically eliminated any missing garments," he remarks.

He was reluctant to use permanent barcoding with drycleaning because of the problem of tags being placed in different areas. Also, drycleaning does not come in with the same frequency as laundered shirts. But after studying the situation, Cote decided to barcode all of the drycleaning that comes into the store.

"The benefits outweigh everything else," he concludes. "There was so much benefit with the shirt laundering that we're doing it with the drycleaning."

Cote warns that, to receive the full benefit of barcoding and automatic assembly, some initial legwork is required.

"If you are a cleaner who is conscientious enough to put in a lot of information about the garments that come in, then it will save you money," he explains. "I think there are some cleaners who still don't bother to do that."

Cote's business is fully automated, and he says he is waiting for technological advances to automate even further. He is particularly interested in radio frequency identification (RFID), which is similar to barcoding, except no direct line of sight is needed when scanning items. Cote says he does not like the size of RFID chips.

"As far as a location like ours, we've gone as far as we can," he says. "When we had the option of using RFID, we chose to stick with barcoding."

Metalprogetti bagger

Metalprogetti produces large-scale automated assembly conveyors and recently developed an automated bagger that interfaces with its equipment. The first bagger was scheduled to be installed in January at Village Cleaners in Longview, Texas.

"We're very, very excited about introducing this bagger," says Frank Dubasik, director of U.S. operations for Metalprogetti. "We displayed it in Savannah, and we displayed it in Long Beach. Our bagger is very unique."

What makes the bagger unique is that it has an automatic labeling device. When an order is scanned, it is placed on the Metalprogetti conveyor randomly and is electronically matched to a slot. When the entire order is on the conveyor, it is extracted to a rail that separates the orders. It is then extracted to another rail that will feed the automatic bagger, all while maintaining the integrity of the order.

The automatic labeling device then puts a label on the order, so there is no need for a human to do it.

"On that manual bagging application, we get double the loading speed," says Dubasik. "When you go to the integrated bagging – which no one else can do – with the label printer, we can now match the loading speed of the manual bagging application."

In addition to the labeling feature, Metalprogetti's new automatic bagger can use any size poly up to 30 inches and is extremely easy to load.

"Loading poly is a challenge, but the way you load our poly is so simple," he says. "Through the experience of having to service all these customers, we looked at all the shortfalls that other products had, and we produced a product that we think is far better. The main advantage that we've gained is the ability to label the garments and label the bundles."

Metalprogetti also has a new product designed to make routes more efficient. After bundles come off of the bagger, they come down a transport rail and are loaded onto the sequencing conveyor. Here, they can be organized according to the order of the delivery route.

HMC Solutions' automated drycleaning assembly conveyor.

This also saves labor because a machine – rather than a human – is sorting the bundles.

"Sometimes, loading took a while, but now that we've introduced automatic loading, there's no human there waiting," notes Dubasik. "That has dramatically changed the rate of return on this type of product."

Bundles don't necessarily have to be put in a certain order, and the route sequencing conveyor doesn't have to be used exclusively for routes.

For example, a central plant with multiple stores can load the conveyor with garments that are destined for a particular drop store.

In one revolution of the conveyor, the driver gets all the orders destined for that particular store.

"That's something that customers have been really interested in," says Dubasik. "Not only can it be used for route sequencing, it can also be used simultaneously as a store/dispatch conveyor."

Sankosha design service

Sankosha USA does not have a new product, but the company is offering a new design service through its distributors that can help drycleaners make the most out of their space.

Odorizzi says that because every drycleaning business is different, this design service can help owners make the most of their layout by situating pieces of equipment in such a way that efficiency improves.

"What you really want to do is to try and maximize what you have, and it basically boils down to answering some questions and being able to see the flow of the facility and what you're trying to achieve," he explains.

This design service, which is free, was introduced a few months ago. At a dealer meeting at the end of last year, distributors were trained to provide this service to drycleaners, according to Odorizzi.

Drycleaners provide their distributors with information about their plant, and these data are fed into a computer program that provides a professional layout. Distributors are trained to know what questions to ask and what to look for in the plant.

Odorizzi says this design service can provide drycleaners with flexibility and visibility.

"Once you have a working document like this, you can truly appreciate why and how this stuff will work," he notes.

Odorizzi says that drycleaners don't necessarily have to purchase equipment from Sankosha to utilize the design service.

"We feel it's just something that makes – when [drycleaners] decide to make that purchase – a much better investment for them," he explains.

He goes on to say that automated equipment, like Sankosha's automatic bagger, is vital for drycleaners who are looking to save time and money.

"As we go forward in challenging economic times, the cleaners who are going to be here in the future are really looking at automation much more seriously than they ever have," he explains.

In addition, manually bagging clothes is very mundane and tedious, Odorizzi says, but it must be done.

"When you can have a machine do it on the machine's time," he says, "then you can efficiently and effectively use your people for other things that are needed." **DCN**