



Unused stack builds brand ID.



Three generations of family business leadership (l/r) Bill, David, George and Matt Kartsonis



(l/r) Louis A. Kartsonis, Georgia Rose Spainhauer, Bill Lanos (late 1930s)



A view of Superior's plant in downtown Kansas City

Superior Linen

Changing at the Speed of Business

Fourth-generation laundry thrives on customer-driven innovation

By Jack Morgan

In an era when consolidation of linen supply companies is transforming the textile service business, it's fair to ask how some independents are managing not just to survive, but to grow their operations in today's hospitality and healthcare markets.

For Superior Linen Supply, the answer lies in its ability to deliver enhanced customer service in the processing and marketing of both rental and NOG (not our goods) textiles. Superior's goal is to convince customers that they can rely on the company to deliver a reliable service with a solid value, says Superior President Bill Kartsonis.

"We try to be progressive," he adds. "We've got to offer better products and service all the time. Our customers know we're looking out for their interests."

Based in Kansas City, MO, Superior Linen delivers on its promise of progressive products and services in a variety of ways, as this

correspondent learned during a recent visit to the company. Below are highlights of that trip, starting with a tour of Superior's plant located in a former cable car building in downtown Kansas City.

Old bottle, new wine

Superior Linen's plant at 3046 Holmes St. has the look and feel of a classic commercial laundry. Bill's son Matt, company vice president and a fourth-generation part owner, proudly announces to anyone within earshot that Superior is "the oldest continuously operating commercial laundry west of the Mississippi River." The official date of the company's founding is 1893. Bill says Superior operated a hand laundry service for several years before that date. However, like many companies of this vintage, there's scant evidence, such as letters or public documents, to pinpoint its earliest days.

Superior has operated at its current site since the early 1930s, says Matt. The 33,000-square-foot building used to power and house cable cars. "There was a powerhouse for electric trolley cars," he adds, pointing to the remnants of metal rails on which transit vehicles once rolled. "We bought this building in 1930 and moved in later that year. We changed and reconfigured the space, and knocked out holes and expanded it."

Standing near the soil-sort area of the plant is one piece of equip-



Another view of the plant, which once housed and provided power for electric trolley cars



A glimpse inside the Superior plant of yesteryear



Founder Louis A. Kart—A Model A laundry route vehicle with driver (circa 1920s) sons with horsepower (circa 1902)



Route Service Rep. Brandon Eggerman stands beside his laundry vehicle in February 2006.

ment that surely required some creative planning to fit into this relatively snug space—a Pellerin Milnor Corp. tunnel washer with seven 110-lb. modules. The tunnel was installed in 1991. More recent plant improvements include an autosortation system that Automation Dynamics LLC installed five years ago (see related story pg. 50) and an Ecolab Elados® pump tunnel system that was added last year. “We put this chemical injection system in around last Memorial Day,” says Matt. “It’s so much more accurate. It has saved us 20% on chemicals over last year.” At the end of the tunnel washer, Superior has a Passat two-stage press. A conveyor system leads “cakes” of pressed linens to three 220-lb. Passat dryers.

Matt describes a number of innovative uses of machinery in the plant, such as the laundering of heavily soiled bar mops in the tunnel. “A lot of people say you can’t do heavy soil in a tunnel,” says Matt, who speaks between cell phone calls and message checks on his BlackBerry®. “I disagree. We revised our wash formulas with our Ecolab Territory Manager Bill Evans to clean bar mops. We can get bar mops out of the tunnel in 50 minutes—and they’re beautiful.”

Matt adds that close collaboration with vendors is an essential part of Superior’s efforts to grow the company. “We see our relationship with Ecolab as a partnership,” he says. “We work hand in

hand, communicating our needs so that they can deliver to us the superior products we require. Strong partnerships with our vendors contribute to our success. It’s much more productive for all than being adversarial. We strive to develop the same kind of relationship with vendors that we want our customers to have with us.”

Other equipment in Superior’s plant includes an eclectic mix of vintage washers operating a few feet from the latest cutting-edge ironing and folding equipment. One machine, a Classic S large-piece folder with dual max stackers by Jensen USA Inc., was purchased at last year’s Clean Show in Orlando, FL, Matt says. He adds that the folder makes three folds both lengthwise and crosswise, making a more compact package for the super king-sized sheets now used by hotels with super thick luxury mattresses. Superior also maintains a unique system for processing fitted sheets, Matt says. “Our spreader feeder can do both fitted sheets and flat sheets without any adjustments. The operator just puts the corner hem of the fitted sheet in the clip, folding the side panel down in the ironer.”

Another innovative, laborsaving machine folds terry towels of various sizes. “For all the hospitality towels, instead of having to presort, the employees just feed—bath towels, hand towels and bath mats. You can feed them all at the same time and it automatically



Jean Bartelt

A Vendor's Perspective—

Tech Tools for Enhanced Competitiveness

A look at linen tracking in a “mixed plant”—hospitality and healthcare

Automation Dynamics has worked with Superior Linen Supply, Kansas City, MO, since 2000, when company President Bill Kartsonis had two vacuum soil-counting systems installed. One system was custom configured to handle his healthcare items; the other was designed for food and beverage linens. Since Kartsonis operates a mixed plant, he wanted to ensure that these systems were flexible enough to meet his needs. Not surprisingly, he took an active role in the design process.

With a desire for continuous improvement and a knowledge of the tools available to him, Kartsonis has been a valuable partner in developing new ideas in the automation of plant operations. Currently, we are working on a couple of projects with Superior Linen.

Tracking linens by piece or weight

One initiative is to implement a weigh scale interface into the company's counting stations. Superior Linen wants the ability to designate a count lane that will capture a weight, rather than a quantity in the VCS 2000 Count-Master™ software.

For example, the operator could pick three different items to sort at one time with two of the items going up the vacuum tubes and being counted and one item being weighed. The output from the scale would transfer to the count-system software and on to route accounting for tracking and billing purposes. This tool will be valuable for plants that bill some customers by piece count and others by weight.

Real-time product tracking

Another project is a near real-time shipping and receiving system, using the Nextel cellular phone system with its GPS (global positioning system) and data collection provided by Xora. This application will allow real-time data collection, and tracking of delivery and pickup for all of the company's drivers.

Below is an outline of the functions planned for the system:

1. Build a linen cart, adding each item to a cart to be tracked by a unique barcode assigned to each cart.
2. Scan the cart upon delivery at the customer site from a Nextel phone equipped with a barcode scanner. This data will transmit back via the cellular network.

3. Scan and weigh carts on return to Superior Linen's plant. A weigh station consisting of a floor scale, industrial computer and tethered barcode scanner will stand near the receiving dock for this task.

4. Allow real-time reporting of cart delivery, available to customers via a Web link. Reporting criteria for this project aren't fully defined yet, but at a minimum the system will collect the following data:

- Date/time stamp for each operation, plus the user who processed the operation
- Where the operation took place, and
- Each cart's current location and contents.

5. The data collected from this system will be transferred to Superior Linen's route-accounting system.

The projects described [here] are but two of the efforts we have on the front burner with Superior Linen. Kartsonis has several other ideas for using technology and pneumatic conveying to improve his company's production and tracking capabilities.

Better service and profitability

The projects described above are but two of the efforts we have on the front burner with Superior Linen. Kartsonis has several other ideas for using technology and pneumatic conveying to improve his company's production and tracking capabilities. Those steps, in turn, could enable Superior to further improve its quality and service to customers, while ensuring enhanced profitability.

—Jean Bartelt, Automation Dynamics LLC, Independence, MO



A route driver secures laundry carts in his truck.



Soil goods move on a conveyor into the tunnel washer.



An employee processes soil goods.



Soil goods move via conveyor into the tunnel washer.



A look at the plant's chemical injection equipment



A view of tunnel modules



A "cake" of clean, damp linens emerges from the press.

knows how to fold them and sort them," Matt says, referring to electric sensor lights on the machine that automatically gauge the size of towels moving through the folder. The equipment then applies a precisely directed puff of air to fold the towels.

The plant employs 65 people who process about 150,000 lbs. of hospitality and healthcare linens (including scrubs and lab coats) per week, says Matt. Production is split roughly 50-50 between rental and NOG. Superior operates six days a week, with 1.5 shifts Monday through Friday, and one full shift on Saturday.

Additional equipment in the plant includes:

- One 150-lb. Troy washer
- One 450-lb. Pellerin Milnor washer
- One large Pellerin Milnor press
- One 220-HB, 4-pass boiler
- One Watts 6-roll utility ironer
- One Passat thermal fluid ironer
- One Hy-pro flatwork ironer with inverted chest
- Two Passat spreader feeders
- 600+ laundry carts
- One Colmac tunnel finisher

- One 2,000-gallon hot water tank
- An overhead rail system

When asked about the thinking behind this mix of new and older equipment, Matt replies, "Our customers have great confidence in our ability to deliver on our commitments. It's no accident that they feel that way. We've got redundancies built in. We had a small fire in the plant in 1990. We were back up and running the same day." In the next six to eight months, Superior plans to acquire a second Pellerin Milnor 10-pocket tunnel.

John Holloway remembered

The exterior of Superior's plant reflects the company's focus on marketing as well as production. A large eye-catching sign faces the street, pointing prospective customers to the company's retail uniform store located about a block away. Looking up to the roof, a large industrial smokestack prominently displays the company name in vertical type. "The stack is no longer functional," says Matt. "We just cleaned it up and painted it."

Keeping up the building that houses Superior Linen is important, not just for prospective customers, but also for the staff, of whom most live within a 15-minute drive of the plant, says Matt. That may be one reason why employee turnover is low. In fact, Matt says,

Plant



A view of pressing equipment in the finishing department



Employees feed sheets into a flatwork ironer.



An employee collects napkins on a small-piece accumulator.



Sheets emerge from a folding machine.



Another view of the plant's flatwork finishing equipment



Employees feed napkins and prepare finished goods for packout.

associates tend to stay with Superior for several years. On the day *Textile Rental* visited, a long-time route driver who was moving to another job was fêted with cake and a going-away party by his colleagues and Superior's owners.

At most companies, a handful of employees become legendary for their loyalty and long tenure. Superior's longest-serving employee was John Holloway, says Matt.

"Our longest-time employee was with us 51 years," says Matt of Holloway. "He passed away a year ago. He retired twice but came back to work. He was a washman. He showed us that you can 'teach old dogs new tricks.' He learned to operate the tunnel. He was here for all four generations of the company."

Tracking goods via GPS

Staying in business as long as Superior has means managers also must learn new tricks to cope with a constantly shifting customer base. About 25 years ago, Matt says, Superior moved into the direct-sale apparel market in order to create another revenue stream for the business. Healthcare now is viewed as the most exciting growth area due to reduced use of tablecloths at restaurants, particularly at semi-casual eateries. Bill sounds a philosophical note about this trend. "We understand the markets and we respond

accordingly," he says. "The chains come in and they get their formulas. Linen is no more than 0.08% of their budget."

Superior is responding to the reduced use of tablecloths and other changes in two ways—by pursuing new markets and products, and by improving efficiency to help control costs and enhance service. Take route management, for example. Superior recently equipped its 11 route service trucks with global positioning system (GPS) transponders. It cost Superior roughly \$1 a day per driver to install and operate these tracking devices that automatically send out alerts if the driver strays from a set route, or violates speed limits or other traffic rules. Just as important, the GPS system helps Superior track the flow of its goods to customers.

"The most critical area is you can monitor the route and you can use it for data collection," says Bill of the GPS system. Superior drivers scan a barcode on their carts when they make deliveries. This greatly reduces the number of questions about who delivered what, where and at what time.

"The number one thing we have to offer our customers is our integrity," Bill says, noting that the system enables Superior to "triple-check" both its deliveries and the quantities of goods shipped from the plant to each customer.

The recent growth in the healthcare market has inspired the

Superior Outtakes—

An Independent Voice

Bill Kartsonis speaks out on family biz transitions, immigration reform

How should a family business like yours manage an effective leadership transition?

First, there must be a basic agreement among the family about transition. Then there must be a serious ongoing commitment by the next generation. They must understand that sacrifices are to be made. One must invest financially.

Areas of responsibility need to be divided among family members. Hopefully you can grow the business so that it is large enough for there to be a distinct responsibility which each person is running.

Are there outside resources, such as consulting firms or university training, that can help?

1. TRSA articles
2. Weiser LLP (CPA firm) and specifically, its consultant, Art Kuperman
3. Plenty of articles and books

How has this worked at Superior over your four generations of leadership?

There is never a perfect course. Out of love, family members are taken care of for many years. I give glory to God for all the blessings that I have had and for pulling us through challenging times.

Ultimately, if a business is to survive, business has to come ahead of family. We have had our rough spots, but it is truly a joy to have my sons (Matt and David) working along with me.

I must point out that this could not have happened had my family not been given priority all the years I have been at the business. The business was not as successful as it could have been.

I chose to leave and be there to coach my kids at soccer. I was at the Boy Scout meetings every week. I went on the weekend campouts every month, and even spent 7-10 days at camp each summer.

Besides this, the boys learned how to work, both at home and at the business. They understand the commitment it takes to keep a business running.

Finally, none of this would have worked had not my wife, Jan, shared this commitment. Since she anchored and managed the home, I was able to perform my work. Then in later years she joined the business and persevered through the difficult family transitions. We must not fail to mention that there is another key: the addition of nonfamily members to our professional staff.

Congress is looking at several bills on immigration reform.

Would tighter immigration rules hurt the textile service business? From your perspective, what approach should policymakers take to the recent growth in immigration that the United States is experiencing?

The U.S. economy is on a roll. Hotels and restaurants project continuing increases in volume and profitability. Fundamentals are in place for well-managed linen suppliers to have a good year—*unless* the labor supply collapses.

The majority of hotel workers in the United States are foreign born. A large number of laundry workers are foreign born. Employers know their workers are reliable and trust that their proper-looking documents are, too.

We are a nation of immigrants.

At Superior Linen, we are proud that a number of our employees have become naturalized U.S. citizens. When I was studying economics in the early '70s, it was known that we would have to expand immigration to maintain economic growth. This was due to two important factors:

(1) *Zero population growth.* We bought into the two-child norm, and other social factors that reduced our fertility rate.

(2) *College bound/desk job.* We raise our kids to desire management or “information” positions. Certainly not to perform manual labor. Our educators steer kids to get a college degree or nothing. (We will leave the discussion of our education system for another time.)

Contact your elected officials.

Contact your U.S. senators and representatives. If Congress goes on to enact border restrictions (and all that is in the bill which passed the House recently) without guest worker visas, *the economy will come to a halt and employers will be called criminals!* There are 10 to 20 million workers who keep the economy going by performing needed work. The current restrictions on immigration are ridiculously tight. Further, the rules were written and enforced with a winked eye.

Call, write and see your congressmen. They do listen. Tell them you believe that America needs to keep being the Land of Opportunity. Tell them we should legally welcome new workers. Share your personal story with them. My U.S. senators are servants of the people and know who I am. Do not allow the media to make you think that our government is essentially corrupt and listens only to special interests. All interests are special. Make yours known.—*Jack Morgan*



Bill Kartsonis



A flatwork ironer in the plant



A small-piece folder



A vintage 150-lb. Troy washer



A vintage Pellerin Milnor linen press



Scrubs and other apparel move on a conveyor after processing in the tunnel finisher.



An employee monitors apparel items emerging from the finishing tunnel.

younger generation (Matt and his brother, David Kartsonis) to expand into serving more healthcare customers. Matt notes that they use a colorful “sprinter” van to make deliveries. The diesel engine gets 22 miles per gallon, he says.

Mad about microfiber

Another fresh idea Superior has pursued is providing microfiber dust cloths, bar mops (such as its new Banana Cloth™ bar mops) and floor mops to both healthcare and hospitality customers. Superior managers like microfiber because customers rave at how well it cleans floors, countertops and other surfaces. The company purchases highly durable microfiber dust-control products from a Korean supplier, Matt says. While the plant must separate microfiber from cotton or blended fabrics during processing, microfiber cleans up with relative ease once plant employees know how to handle it, he says.

“We’ve had great success with microfiber towels in the front and the back of the house of restaurants,” Matt adds. “We let them ‘demo’ it and most of them sign on. With just water, it’ll eliminate about 96% of the dirt because it has so much friction.” The microfiber bar mops last for 200 to 250 uses, compared to 16 to 17 uses for standard 32-oz. cotton bar mops.

Bill describes how Superior first got involved with microfiber mops for his healthcare customers. “We converted an NOG customer to rental. Their environmental services manager said they wanted microfiber mops. We said, ‘huh?’ because we were linen people. Then we learned about microfiber and how it absorbs up to seven times the amount of liquid as cotton.”

Bill, who also serves as president of the Kansas City Chapter of the International Executive Housekeepers Association, cites the numerous advantages of microfiber, including the fact that the 24-inch mops used in hospitals are lighter and easier for hospital cleaning staffs to use.

“It’s better ergonomically,” Bill says of the mops. “We have to train them, but it’s less strain on the back and shoulders.”

Elaborating on the science behind microfiber, Bill notes that the fibers are 100 times smaller than a human hair and then they’re split. “It’s got these barbs that pick up more dirt and hold it in the mop. It’s like a magnet in the way it attracts dust.”

Filling the gaps

Superior works in other ways to enhance the value of its services to healthcare customers. Examples include offering new products, such as antimicrobial sheets featuring threads treated with a silver-

Plant



A linen storage area in the plant



Superior's proprietary microfiber bar mop, called Banana Cloth™



Workwear on display in Superior's direct-sale showroom



Superior's direct-sale uniform store, located a short walk from the main plant



Another view of Superior's uniform store

based finish woven into the fabric.

To ensure quality service, Superior also assigns its staff to work hand in hand with healthcare employees in hospital linen rooms. And while Superior carefully manages its linen inventory, the company's focus on customer service includes the expectation of a certain amount of linen loss, particularly with low-cost items such as washcloths that seldom last for more than 15 washings.

"I'm never going to let an inexpensive item like a washcloth come between me and my customer," Bill says.

As an independent operator with a limited budget for training and R&D, Bill says TRSA helps him bridge the gap in these areas. "We appreciate the insights provided by TRSA," he says, offering praise for the association's linen life surveys, its information on production benchmarking, its assessments of account profitability and more. Matt also has taken advantage of training through TRSA and UTSA's Production Management Institute (PMI).

"TRSA has provided information so we can work smarter," Bill says.

Focus on fundamentals

The more one learns about Superior Linen—its focus on providing both reliable service and innovation in the plant, on the route and

directly to customers through products such as microfiber—the easier it is to see why Superior has been around for over 113 years.

"Our customers know they can depend on us," says Matt. "That's the way we want our customers to be."

Another factor is that Superior tracks its costs closely, with carefully planned equipment upgrades in the plant and on the route. These moves are aimed at maximizing productivity in this highly competitive market.

"Kansas City has always been dominated by family-owned companies," Bill says of the linen supply business here. "We've always had to be efficient to stay in business."

Superior communicates clearly with its customers in order to determine their needs and provide them with products and services that will maximize each customer's ROI in a linen supply service.

"We realize people have a choice," Bill says. "People can use disposables. We've got to demonstrate value. We've been able to show hotels and hospitals that not only can we do a better job, but we can do it cost-effectively." **TR**



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