



Dirty Laundry

A towering bagging machine takes the center stage at a fast-growing industrial laundry operator

Airing one's dirty laundry in public is never a good idea, the old proverb suggests, and it would be a recipe for downright disaster when the laundry piles in question are measured in tonnes, as they do for the **Buanderie centrale de Montréal inc.** facility in downtown Montreal.

"We currently wash 8.5 million kilograms of linen or, if you prefer, 45 million different items a year," says Renault Marier, general manager of the industrial laundry operated by the city-owned **Agence de santé et des services sociaux of Montréal.**

Started up in 1979, the busy plant—located a stone's throw away from the Versailles Shopping Center near the intersection of Autoroute 25 and Sherbrooke Street—currently handles staggering volumes of bed sheets, fitted sheets, pillowcases, bath towels, face-cloths and bibs shipped in daily from 22 hospitals located on the Montreal Island, with much more to come soon.

"We already take care of 22 per cent of all linen used by the Montreal hospitals, which makes us 'Number One' in our marketplace," states Marier, adding that the ongoing construction of two new university hospitals in the city will soon mean even higher volumes of work for Buanderie centrale, which has been subcontracted to service both new hospitals.

"By 2009, we should handle 12 million kilos of linen yearly," says Marier.

"It is much more cost-effective for the two university hospitals to send their linen over to us rather than build a laundry on-site at each hospital," adds Marier, pointing out savings of 25 to 30 per cent when using the Buanderie centrale services.

Marier credits the company's thriving business to the arrival of a new management team back in the year 2000, as well as the \$13 million that has been earmarked for various capital improvements and modernization projects to be carried out the facility between 2006 and 2009.

"When we took over," Marier recalls, "the Buanderie production topped out at 32 kilos of washed linen per working hour. Today, our production level is up to 50 kilos of washed linen per working hour."

"With this growth set to continue," he points out, "we expect to reach 60 kilos of washed linen per hour by 2009, representing a production increase of 20 per cent over two years."

With the three-year modernization plant aiming to implement significant capacity increases, the Buanderie centrale plant has already invested in a range of new high-throughput equipment, relates Marier, including a new washing tunnel, new dryers and pressing machines, and a very special, one-of-a-kind bagging machine.

"Two-and-a-half years ago," Marier recounts, "we carried out a study on time and movement, which revealed that half of the time spent by the workers assigned to manual bagging



The one-of-a-kind V/F/F/S machine built and installed by WeighPack Systems yielded immediate productivity improvements at the Buanderie centrale industrial laundry facility in Montreal, while freeing up some workers for the more value-added quality control jobs.

was devoted to picking up a bag, opening it up, putting it on a support, and then closing it.

"These observations lead us a simple conclusion: we would make important production gains in automating the bagging job function," Marier states.

"So we immediately went on to conduct search for an automated bagging machine capable of satisfying our special production needs."

This search for a large-scale, automated bagging machine prompted the Buanderie centrale reps to attend packaging industry trade-shows, as well as pay visits to some of the more prominent bagging machine manufacturers.

LOCAL HELP

Eventually, local packaging equipment manufacturer **Weigh-Pack Systems Inc.** came up with just the solution that the Buanderie centrale plant was looking for, according to Marier.

"We finally realized that the machine with the best potential was available right here in Montreal," he states, praising WeighPack's ability to produce made-to-measure equipment to satisfy the heavy-duty production requirements and the unusual size dimensions.

Installed a few months ago, the unique vertical form/fill/seal (V/F/F/S) type of bagging machine supplied by Weigh-Pack is a towering, 15-foot-tall, 22-inch-diameter system designed for handling plastic film bags with a length of 24 to 36 inches—with loading capacity of up to five kilograms.

"WeighPack supplied us with a made-to-measure unit equipped with a feeding system that includes tables that move up to 15 feet prior to dumping the linen in the bags placed on a vibrating plate, which adequately compacts the load," Marier explains. "To prevent air from entering the bags, two cylinders make holes on each side of the bag."

With concrete productivity gains observed during the very first run of the WeighPack bagging machine, the new system quickly allowed the plant to switch some of its per-

sonnel from tedious manual bagging jobs to the more value-added quality control functions, according to Marier, "killing two birds with one stone."

For WeighPack's territory manager Charles Nadeau, the Buanderie centrale installation provided an interesting test for the company's technical staff, as well as a possible new market opportunity.

"About 98 per cent of the bagging machines we supply go to the food industry," he says, "so it was a challenge in itself to cater, for the first time, to the needs of a new market segment."

"The bag size was also an interesting challenge, since it is not that often that we supply bagging machines for bags of such size," he adds. "We also had to solve the problem related to the fall of a light product, such as a pillowcase, from a height of 15 feet."

"On the other hand, we had to make sure that no linen piece would interfere with the operation of the bag-closing jaws," Nadeau points out, "and that the linen would be properly packed inside the bags. That's why the bags are placed on a vibrating plate with the right compacting capacity."

"And last but not least, we had to ascertain that only the minimum amount of air would be able enter the bags," he states. "We did so by installing piercing equipment on each side of the bags to make two holes that would let the air out."

Despite all the technical challenges and unique application requirements, Nadeau says he is proud of the way WeighPack staff managed to assemble and install a custom bagging system for Buanderie centrale, summing up:

"This project required a lot of R&D (research-and-development) efforts on our behalf, but they were all worth it, as the Buanderie centrale plant is now planning the installation of a second WeighPack unit." ♦



A simple touchscreen graphic user interface takes care of all the programming on the fully-automated WeighPack Systems machine.

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