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Traditionally, the months leading up to spring provide a perfect opportunity to refresh and brighten up your vended laundry. Most of us tend to experience a spike in business during spring and fall.

During these times, our customers are switching their clothing and other washable items from one season to another. Heavier clothes come out in the fall while the lighter stuff is put away, only to be brought out for the warmer weather beginning in the springtime. In addition, comforters, blankets and other heavier bedding are typically replaced with lighter items starting in the spring.

The family's laundry must be washed, dried, folded and hung to be put away until next season. As a result, your regular customers' loads will be larger, and you likely will be seeing some new faces with a lot of dirty clothes during this time.

Just a note: although "spring cleaning" has a nice ring to it and spring is when most people do their serious house cleaning – depending on business traffic in your particular location – you

can choose any other slower-than-normal time during the year to embark on enhancing your facility. For example, my slowest months at all of my laundries were typically January and August.

Those of you with relatively newer stores and newer equipment will welcome and withstand this increased spring and fall business without missing a beat. However, those with older laundromats that may look a bit tired and worn – especially your washers and dryers – will be needing a boost to keep up with the competition.

SPRING CLEANING

It's not a great idea to install shiny new machines in a dirty store, so let's start with a little cleaning first. Pay special attention to your floors, walls, ceiling and light fixtures. Because you've been in your laundry innumerable times over the years, some of your store's shortcomings may have become almost invisible to you. It's human nature to just simply look past them, to no longer notice them. But, believe me, your customers – especially the new ones – will notice *everything*.

Let's begin with that eighth-of-an-inch of dryer

dust that has accumulated on your walls and the tops of your bulkheads. After wiping them clean, perhaps consider a fresh coat of paint, maybe different colors that your customers will notice.

Now is also a great time to update your interior signage – those directional signs, informational signs, reminder signs and must-have signs that address liability issues. They can be bright and cheery and add splashes of color to your walls, while still conveying their messages.

Cracked floor tiles and stained or broken ceiling tiles must be replaced. (During this time, it also would be a good idea to inspect and fix any overhead pipes or roof leakage that may be causing ceiling tile stains, otherwise it will continue to occur.) All light fixtures, including exit signs, should be brought back to working order. And, of course, your windows and glass doors should be washed with soap, water and ammonia – inside and out.

Restrooms are particularly important – so be sure to paint, tile and/or floor your way to a brand new look in this portion of your facility. Remove (and find a new home for) any dirty mops, brooms and buckets that you currently may be stashing in there. Also, be sure to fix or replace any broken bathroom tissue and paper towel dispensers, and then make certain to keep them full at all times. Everyone, especially moms with kids, will really appreciate this extra effort.

If your store has a front counter where your attendants greet customers, exchange money and take in wash-dry-fold orders, do this: walk in through your front door, stand in front of the desk, and take a hard, critical look at what your customers see when they first enter your business. If you don't like what you see, clean it up and organize it to make it more welcoming and appealing to the eye.

If you're providing a wash-dry-fold service, now is the time to install new shelves and hanging bars for garment storage. Avoid dark, bulky wood shelves, which tend to become the focal point. Your completed drop-off orders should be neatly and prominently displayed for all to see.

If your shelves are currently empty or only sparsely filled, you and your staff can bring in your own comforters, blankets and clothing to put on display. After all, there is a certain level of comfort and confidence that develops when seeing a lot of other people's clothes and washable items up on your store's shelves. This most likely will give your wash-dry-fold business a nice boost.

Lastly, go outside and take a good, long look at your storefront up close, as well as from the parking lot. Remember that what people see outside tells them a lot about what they're going to encounter inside. Potential new customers can easily become turned off by a dirty, dingy, nasty store entrance.

Fix or update your exterior signage. Freshly paint door and window frames and mullions. Replace any old chairs, benches and/or trash cans, if necessary. And have your sidewalk professionally cleaned.

Also, in my opinion, if your store's front windows lack professionally painted signage, you're missing out on one of the most effective and inexpensive forms of advertising your laundry business. Using big, bold letters, spell out exactly what you have inside: *"Giant Washers and Dryers," "Attendant Always on Duty," "Try Our Same-Day Wash-Dry-Fold Service,"* etc. What's more, display your business' hours of operation (including time of last wash) largely and clearly on your front door. This will give your storefront a brand new look.

Over the years I've done some spring cleaning and retooling in my stores, and the results have always been incredible. In many ways, they become new laundries all over again. It's like getting into a new car for the first time; your customers will be able to feel and smell the newness – and you don't have to spend a lot of money.

RETOOLING

The next step is to take a look at your store's washers, dryers and even the water heating system. Before investing a sizeable amount of money in any new equipment, it's always a good idea to pull out your lease to see if you need to

“ Maybe you haven't done much (or any!) advertising in a while, so take this opportunity to get the word out just as though you are opening for the very first time. ”

call your landlord and add some additional years to the agreement. In general, if you have fewer than 10 years left, you definitely want to negotiate an additional one or two five-year options.

In my case, the laundromats I have re-tooled over the years have been located in shopping centers, and I've had the good fortune of working with property managers who were extremely professional and keenly aware of the value of having a modern vended laundry as part of their mix of businesses.

After explaining my plan to inject a large amount of money to refurbish and retool my store – and to stick around for a long time – these landlords were more than happy to work with me on lease terms.

Straight replacement of washers is fine. However, be aware of the fact that, if you have the space and will be increasing the number of washers in your laundry, you may be getting into a potential sewer impact fee issue in some areas. It's rare, and I've never personally experienced it. But it's certainly something to keep in mind.

Keep in mind that many municipalities across the U.S. have not kept up with new machine technology and are still using water consumption tables from the Stone Age. They don't account for the fact that twice as many of today's high-efficiency washers will use half of the water of the older models – and that your customers can wash more clothes as a result. Also, couple that with the fact that little moisture is left in the clothes after the final, high-extract spin cycle, thus offering significant gas savings during the drying process.

Several years ago, I replaced a dozen older 18-pound frontload washers with

the same number of high-efficiency double-loaders. Before installing the new machines, I had my plumber replace all of the 15-year-old water spigots (some of which had been dripping for quite a while). In addition, my electrician inspected the wiring inside the bulkheads and replaced some fixtures where necessary.

Over the next six months, a water bill analysis revealed that it cost me *nothing* for the new equipment – and I increased my revenue by \$14,000 over the previous year. Let me explain...

Previously, my 12 18-pound frontload washers, vended at \$2, were turning four times per day on average – factoring in significant machine down time. Revenue for a 30-day period was about \$2,880.

After replacing the original machines, the new double-loaders, vended at \$2.25 (due to higher capacity), turned five times per day with no more down time. As a result, my revenue over a 30-day period increased to \$4,050.

The overall effect of increasing my double-load washer vend price and turns per day alone delivered a substantial return of more than \$14,000. Water savings during the six-month period averaged out to \$218 per month, and machine maintenance and down-time savings was more than \$200 per month. (Yes, it was costing me \$50 every week just to keep those old machines running.)

My combined annual revenue increase for replacing just 12 washers was more than \$19,000. My monthly payment for the new replacement machines was \$355, totaling \$4,260 per year – therefore, the annual net effect was more than \$14,700 in added revenue for my store. Not incidentally, customer appreciation also was running high, and they told me so.

Another topic of conversation is replacing those ancient, multi-load, single-pocket dryers that burn 105,000 BTUs or even the older stack dryers with new ones that use less than 75,000 BTUs to dry the same amount of clothes. Installing new dryers will add dryer capacity, save on natural gas and take up less space.

I'm fairly sure that any owners claiming they can't afford new equipment haven't conducted a serious cost benefit analysis. Knowing what I know after having done it myself, I can't think of any reason not to replace those old, worn out, water- and gas-guzzling machines.

Also, perhaps take a look at your current water heating system, especially if it features a large holding tank. Now, compare it to the newer tank-less models that hang on the wall and produce instant hot water. Replacing that old tank will greatly reduce your natural gas consumption, because you won't be heating water all day and all night. This will save you money and free up space in your back room.

Can those smaller "pods" produce enough hot water to service all of your store's customers on a busy Saturday morning? In many cases, they definitely do. Will they work in your particular scenario? Maybe or maybe not – but it's certainly worth checking into.

So, now that your business has undergone an extensive spring cleaning – and maybe even added some new equipment – don't keep your "brand new store" a secret. Maybe you haven't done much (or any!) advertising in a while, so take this opportunity to get the word out just as though you are opening for the very first time.

Make it a big deal. Call it your "Grand Re-Opening!"