

SHELDON CLEANERS

A FAMILY GROWN & MULTIFACETED ENTERPRISE

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“It was something I could do,” said George Cares, of launching Sheldon Cleaners, in 1949. During its 66-year history, Sheldon Cleaners, in Kentwood, Mich., has reinvented itself multiple times; embraced and eliminated revenue streams; and overcome economic and industry-specific hurdles.



The Cares family and business consultant Michael “Stucky” Szczotka. Pictured, from left, are George, Sandy, Paul, Louie, Hope and Stucky.

Today, George’s sons, Louie and Paul, lead the enterprise. The brothers relish the business’s “fun-factor.” While Sheldon Cleaners remains grounded in the mission and culture George created – one of quality and convenience – it’s morphed into a multi-faceted business encompassing several revenue streams and customer-focused services. The newest addition? A high-speed vended laundry ...

Today, the business umbrellas the 32,000-square-foot Sheldon Cleaners; 25 satellite locations, which are situated in strip malls or real estate owned by the Cares family; a 6,500-square-foot card-

operated vended laundry – The Laundry Café; and a coffee and crêperie inside the laundry – Café Louis. Revenue flows from various income-generators, including drycleaning, self-service laundry, fluff-n-fold, rental income, and food and coffee. All together, the enterprise employs 240 people throughout Grand Rapids, Holland and Kalamazoo, Mich.

George, and his wife, Hope, have five children, including Paul, Louie, Sandy, Linda and Martha. All of them have worked at Sheldon’s front counter over the years. Paul and Louie took over leadership in 2010.

Part 1: The Founding & Growth of Sheldon Cleaners

George launched the business in 1949 after studying architecture in college and serving in the Navy during World War II. As a child, he had worked in his father’s drycleaning business as a tailor and presser. Being an accomplished tailor, George made tailoring services a critical piece of Sheldon’s services for many years.

Tuxedo Rental

Not long after opening, the big thoroughfare where the business was located



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– Sheldon Blvd. – was transformed into a one-way street, according to an *American Drycleaner* story published in September 1984. This choked drop-off business, spurring George to look for another revenue generator. On a quest, George and Hope hopped a train to Chicago.

“We went to Maxwell Street and bought a whole warehouse of used tuxedos,” said Hope, who was 19. George was 22. “On the way home, crates filled with tuxedos lined the train isles. When we arrived home, I waited at the train station guarding the tuxedo crates until George got the truck and drove over to pick us up. The next day we were in the tuxedo rental business.”

Marketing Consistency

The tuxedos were a hit, but George continued to work to ensure Sheldon Cleaners’ success through aggressive and consistent marketing backed by a simple promise. He offered weekly specials on specific garment cleaning and insisted on superior quality and convenience.

The First of Many Satellite Stores

It wasn’t long before George got on a roll buying up small, abandoned gas stations. His first satellite branch, established in 1965, was a renovated Texaco station. “A major talent of Dad’s was picking locations,” said Louie. “He bought little gas stations that were perfect for drycleaning because customers could easily get in and

out for drop-offs and pick-ups.” Ultimately, George converted 12 gas stations into successful satellite stores.

Business boomed. In 1965, George moved Sheldon from its 1,400-square-foot plant (which enjoyed \$23,000 in annual revenue in 1949) to a 5,000-square-foot plant across the street. By 1980, Sheldon Cleaners had moved again—this time to its current plant on Brenton Rd., in Kentwood. At that time, the business garnered \$2 million in annual sales.

Quality Focused

All the while, George focused on quality. He demanded crystal-clear solvents, according to Paul and Louie. “Dad was known to pin a cotton ball to a garment and drop it off for drycleaning at a competitor’s,” said Paul. “He’d do the same at Sheldon Cleaners. Then he’d compare the color of the cotton once the garments were processed. Ours were pure white,” said Paul. “The others were gray because their solvents weren’t clear.” It wasn’t long before Sheldon Cleaners became the largest drycleaner in Western Michigan.



Several soft-mount Continental E-Series washers handle shirt laundry and items including blankets, down comforters, khakis and more.

Committing to High Volume

By 1985, George’s high-volume drycleaning focus spurred him to back off of tailoring. “It was very difficult to train fitters and there were lots of good mom and pop tailor shops around,” said Paul.

Shortly thereafter, the tuxedo rental business was sold and the Cares family commenced building strip malls. “We did the tuxedos in order to survive early on,” said Louie. “But, by 1991, we realized that the tuxedo rental business took 80 percent of our effort and generated just 20 percent of our income.” By comparison, drycleaning took 20, but delivered 80. Meanwhile, the newly developed strip malls began flowing retail rental revenue, according to Louie. Some of the strip malls were anchored by Sheldon satellite stores, making it even easier to rent available space within those malls.



Eight Unipress pant-pressing stations have cut labor hours and boosted throughput and quality.



Approximately 22,000 shirts are processed each week at Sheldon Cleaners.

Part 2: Louie & Paul Take the Reins

George, who is now 90, stops into Sheldon several times a week. It looks a lot different today than it did in 1949.

The business eliminated the use of perchloroethylene (perc) in 2006, substituting DrySolv – a solvent created with n-propyl bromide-based detergent – for a few years. DrySolv is said to be environmentally friendly and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved, yet it is hard on machinery, according to Paul.

“We didn’t want to buy more perc machines because perc is harmful to our employees, us, and the environment,” said Paul, “but our drycleaning machines were becoming corroded using an alternative solvent. We were at a crossroads.” That’s when they turned to Michael “Stucky” Szczotka, who had sold them a few Continental Girbau soft-mount washers through the years. Louie and Paul were thinking hard about getting into different industries.

As the owner of Carrington Cleaners, a drycleaner in Washington Township, Mich., CRDN of Southern Nevada, and Eagle Star Equipment, a commercial laundry and drycleaning equipment distributor in Troy, Mich., Stucky knows drycleaning and laundry. He also knows the vended laundry business, as owner of New Wave Laundromat, in Sterling Heights.

While Stucky was all for helping the Cares brothers develop their first vended laundry, he was also adamant they upgrade their drycleaning plant.

“He came in and pumped new life into Sheldon,” said Paul.

A complete plant overhaul commenced that resulted in huge throughput gains and labor and energy savings.

“We are using less water and energy and delivering better quality,” said Paul of the renovated drycleaning plant. “One of our ads says, ‘We wish all cleaners would go green!’ We have a smaller carbon footprint here than most people have at home.”

By driving operational and energy costs down with the introduction of new drycleaning and finishing equipment, Sheldon Cleaners gains profitability and



Bright lighting, cozy nooks, high-speed Continental laundry equipment and Amish-made folding tables make The Laundry Café an appealing place to do laundry. From their second story office and conference room, the Cares family looks out over The Laundry Café.

an environmentally friendly status. “We are projecting a 10-15 percent elevation in profit,” said Paul.

All told, Sheldon Cleaners is more productive, efficient, green and profitable than ever. Plus, it occupies a 20 percent smaller footprint.

Focused on ways to produce additional revenue from that extra space, Louie and Paul turned to Stucky with their idea of developing a 6,500-square-foot, high-speed vended laundry and café.

Part 3: The Birth of The Laundry Café

Together, they designed a cozy and hip laundry, complete with semi-private areas featuring clusters of laundry equipment, Amish-made folding tables, WIFI, TVs and kids’ play areas. The laundry also encompasses a dining area with an indoor-outdoor fireplace; and Café Louis, offering crepes of all types, wraps, sandwiches, salads, muffins and a full menu of coffees, lattes and mochas. The new laundry is at-

tached to Sheldon Cleaners and features a convenient drive-up door.

“We had 10,000-square-feet available and 32,000 cars drive by daily,” said Paul. “We are on the border of upscale housing and apartments. Mom gave us the idea of building a vended laundry. So we decided to make it a nice one.”

The Laundry Café was developed to be an added revenue generator, but having fun with it was essential to its owners. Immediately, the new laundry spurred an unexpected 30 percent surge in over-the-counter drycleaning sales at that location. Drawing attention to the store – and making passersby smile – is a 10-foot diameter, steaming coffee cup. It is affixed to The Laundry Café’s rooftop.

Equipping The Laundry Café— Continental ExpressWash Washers

Stucky recommended a mix of high-speed Continental equipment—card-operated



Sheldon Cleaners, The Laundry Café and Café Louie are family-owned businesses in Kentwood, Mich. The Cares family started Sheldon Cleaners in 1949. They just opened the vended laundry less than a year ago.

Continental ExpressWash Washers and ExpressDry Dryers.

“We purchased Continental machines for the drycleaning plant through Stucky and have had great success with them,” said Louie. “We’ve replaced all of our old machines with the high-speed Continental soft-mount washers in our drycleaning plant. In 10 years, we’ve never done a thing to them or had to replace bearings.”

For Louie and Paul, going the Continental route on the vended side was a no-brainer. Thus, The Laundry Café touts three 90-, six 55-, eight 40-, 10 30- and 12 20-pound capacity ExpressWash Washers; five 45- and 13 30-pound double-pocket stack ExpressDry Dryers; and six reversing single-pocket 75-pound capacity Continental dryers. “All of the washers are freestanding and high speed,” said Stucky.

Equipped with the ProfitPlus® Control, the washers feature four primary cycle options: SUPERWASH, and extra-long cycle for heavy soil; HOT, for whites; WARM for colorfast and permanent press items; and COLD for colors. They allow customers to add an EXTRA WASH, EXTRA RINSE and/or DELICATE CYCLE. Anytime an “EXTRA” is selected, it adds to overall revenue.

Customers enjoy completing laundry in less than an hour. The ExpressWash Washers produce extract speeds up to 384 G-force, according to Stucky, so they

remove more moisture from every load when compared with traditional hard-mount washers. “Laundry comes out of the washers nearly dry,” he said. “This shortens dry time by up to 50 percent and allows customers to get in and out of the laundry in less than 60 minutes.” Dryers run less often, which conserves natural gas and electricity—cutting operating costs.

Card System Facilitates Laundry Management

Meanwhile the Card Concepts card system seamlessly communicates with the ProfitPlus Control, allowing the Cares brothers to quickly tweak vend prices and programs on multiple machines simultaneously. From a cell phone or remote computer, using the Internet, Paul and Louie can also track revenue and turns per day; run operational reports; execute pricing specials and promotions; and build customer loyalty. Customers just load value onto loyalty cards with cash, debit/credit cards. They then use their loyalty cards to operate the washers and dryers.

Nurturing Wash/Dry/Fold

While the self-service side of the business is humming, full-service wash/dry/fold is also gearing up. “We are just getting into wash/dry/fold,” said Louie, “but want to promote it at all of our drycleaning satellite locations. We piloted wash/dry/fold at

the main store and charge \$20 per laundry bag, no matter what is in it or how much it weighs. It is working out great as a new revenue stream.”

Café Louie Emerges

And, so is the newly developed Café Louie ... The combination laundry/café/drycleaner brings the ultimate to area residents. “We love that our customers can drive up, pick up their drycleaning, a coffee and a wrap, and be on their way in a couple minutes,” said Louie. “We feel good knowing they are receiving quality products and services.”

And like George, Paul and Louie infuse that quality commitment into all they do. “Dad always said you have to work harder than your competitors,” added Louie. “He is the biggest humanist of anyone I’ve ever known. He treated our employees like family.”

Opened less than a year, The Laundry Café and Café Louie are expected to deliver a full return on investment in just five years. Simultaneously, Paul and Louie anticipate that Sheldon Cleaners will enjoy a 10 percent profit boost this year.

Learn more about Sheldon Cleaners, The Laundry Café and Café Louie at www.sheldondrycleaners.com. Find out more about Continental commercial and vended laundry equipment at www.continentalgirbau.com or call 800-256-1073.