

Insider Info

Vended Laundry Solutions
with Tod Sorensen



The Local Laundry Hub: More than a 'Cash-at-all-cost' Business

An exciting movement is taking hold within the laundry industry. More and more laundries are serving as community hubs, where giving back is as important as receiving. Today, the neighborhood laundry is often more than just a place where people wash clothes once weekly. Rather, it delivers multiple services, provides a comfortable enjoyable place to hang out, and initiates and supports community improvement in and outside the store. In doing so, everyone wins.

The Laundry Hub Offers Multiple Services

The idea of offering multiple services, such as drop-off and commercial wash/dry/fold, has been around for a while; and it's a good thing. Laundries today are serving more people within a given demographic by offering services that appeal to renters, businesses, homeowners, professionals and students. As a byproduct, they're better utilizing equipment and attendants, generating considerably more revenue, and better serving the needs of their community.

The Laundry Hub Provides Amenities & an Enjoyable Environment

Additionally, laundries today are drawing and retaining customers with in-store conveniences, including food, coffee, massage chairs, large capacity washers, WIFI and entertainment, as well as "can't-get-anywhere-else" 60-minute wash/dry/fold, ozone disinfection or automatic chemical injection. These perks also contribute to customer satisfaction and improved revenue.

The Laundry Hub Gives Back

But, in order to truly shine, some laundries are doing more. They're investing in their communities and customers — helping them to become better and more secure. Little things can make a big difference, especially for the typically low-income clientele who frequent vended laundries. Read on to discover how laundries around the country are giving back.

Brian Holland, Tyrone Akins and Ray Chamberlin co-own several laundries — branded The Laundry Café — in inner city Philly. They maintain it doesn't take much to touch people, extend a hand, or offer kind words.

"We see the challenges that plague the inner city and we want to address those challenges wherever possible," said Holland. "We can't do everything. But, we believe information is key to change. Our hope



is that through information, we might help people change their life trajectory."

In doing so, the laundries serve as community hubs where customers enjoy a number of educational and family inspired events. "Family Night" encourages families to gather for free pizza and a movie, while an honor roll drawing provides community youth who make the honor roll with a chance to win something fun — like a new iPad.

"It used to be a cash-at-all-cost industry focused on commerce; not community. We are transforming the tarnished image of the laundry industry."

— Brian Holland, co-owner of The Laundry Café

Other programs focus on three areas: healthcare, banking and the digital divide — the gap between those who have ready access to the internet and computers and those who do not. Working with community partners, The Laundry Cafés host programming to help people improve and repair credit and purchase first homes; as well as raise awareness of significant illnesses affecting Latinos and African Americans, including prostate and breast cancer, hypertension and cardiovascular disease. Equipped with WIFI and iPads, each Laundry Café celebrates learning and knowledge by providing all customers quality access to technology and the Web. Finally, to help improve community literacy, Holland, Akins and Chamberlin have provided in-laundry reading and learning opportunities for years.

They aren't alone. Other laundry owners, including Daryl and Lisa Johnson, are transforming their stores to support childhood literacy, as well.

The statistics are grim. Most inner-city children are sub-par readers. In Chicago, for example, nearly 4 in 10 public school students don't meet or exceed reading standards, and more than 60 percent of the city's low-income households don't own a single children's book.

It's a nationwide trend that has spurred a number of organizations to work together to bring learning to the public laundry. National non-profit groups, the LaundryCares Foundation and the Clinton Foundation's Too Small to Fail initiative have launched a new Laundry Literacy Coalition. This new alliance collaboratively works to make early literacy resources available to underserved communities through local laundromats in communities nationwide.

Subsequently, LaundryCares has made Read, Play and Learn (RPL) kits — small interactive learning centers filled with books and educational activities — available for purchase at www.laundrycares.org. Laundry owners like the Johnsons, Holland, Akins and Chamberlin have installed them in their stores, even when it means sacrificing a machine or two.

Four of the Johnsons nine laundries showcase RPLs and their other laundries are slated to have them by year's end. Two of those laundries also bring in local librarians for scheduled "story times." Not only are the RPLs improving literacy within the community, the Johnsons maintain they're strengthening customer loyalty.

"We've found that the RPLs occupy the kids, benefit the community and improve brand loyalty," said Daryl Johnson. "We had a competitor move in across the street of our St. Paul, Minn., laundry with similar equipment and amenities. We knew we needed to differentiate, so we removed two washers — a three load and a five load — to make room for an RPL. While our sales dipped briefly by 20 percent, we've since recovered all the lost revenue," he said. "We have to keep the RPLs clean and organized, but it doesn't take much time and it's truly worth it. Our books disappear, which means they're going home with the kids. And that's exactly what we want."

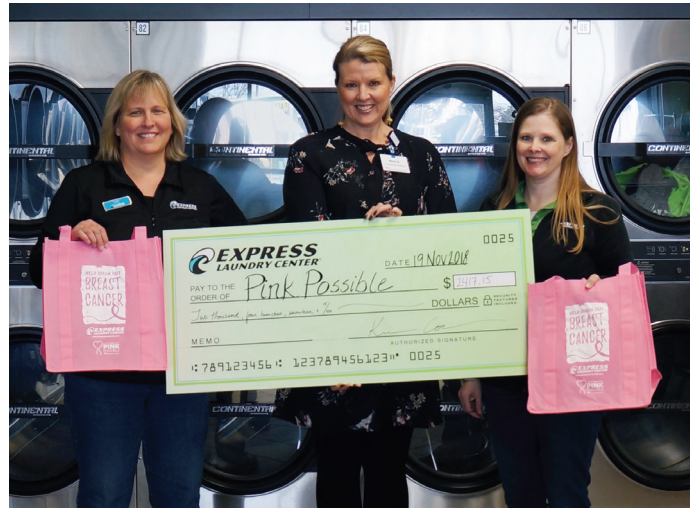
The methods for giving back are many. Some laundries bring value to their communities by hosting blood drives, cleaning and gathering coats for Coats for Kids, contributing a percentage of profit to a cause, like St. Jude's, or sponsoring a local club, team or community event. The sky is the limit and every bit helps.

The Oshkosh Express Laundry Center, in Oshkosh, Wis., gives back in a number of ways, including contributing a percentage of profit to the Aurora Health Care Foundation's Oshkosh Pink Possible (Pink Possible) Breast Health Fund. The Pink Possible campaign, held throughout October each year, engages local businesses to raise money for Aurora Cancer Care breast cancer patients and their families.

"Every time we support a local charity or cause our name gets out there and we get more exposure," said Manager Kristi Williams. "Just the other day, a lady came in to do her laundry and thanked us for our contributions to the Pink Possible campaign. She is in remission after a 2-year battle with breast cancer. It is these opportunities that help strengthen our ties to the community."

At the end of the day, customers appreciate the effort. And, when faced with a choice, they'd rather support the laundry that gives back, over the laundry that doesn't.

"It used to be a cash-at-all-cost industry focused on commerce; not community," said Holland. But, as a growing number of laundry owners work to create a positive change, "we are transforming the tarnished image of the laundry industry."



Express Laundry Center, in Oshkosh, WI, partners with Aurora Health Care Foundation's Oshkosh Pink Possible Breast Health Fund annually to raise money for breast cancer patients and their families.



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