



Whistler Laundry Starts Small — Automates with Growth

By Haley Jorgensen



Industrial
Laundry Profile

By embracing a stepped approach to laundry automation, Whistler Laundry Inc., in Whistler, B.C., increased production 90 percent in just under four years. Starting from scratch, the commercial laundry startup added equipment and automation as it grew — improving product quality, bolstering productivity, capturing new clients and lowering labor costs.

“We have grown at over 30 percent year over year, with the greatest single piece of machinery being the Girbau Industrial (GI) Compact 5-in-One,” said co-owner Chris Armstrong. An automatic feeder, ironer, folder, accumulator and stacker, the Compact single-handedly raised throughput 30 percent when added to the laundry’s equipment lineup in 2015. Quality shot through the roof.

Whistler Laundry’s Market & Foundation

Serving property management companies and mid-sized hotels within a resort community, Whistler Laundry processes customer-owned sheets, towels, duvets, table covers and napkins, among other items. Owned by Armstrong and his wife, Justine, and Steve and Wendy Wheeler, the laundry was formed to complement a cleaning and rental services company operated by Wendy and Justine.

“They weren’t happy with the laundry companies’ services and thought we could do a better job,” said Steve Wheeler.

From the get-go, the business relied on Haddon Equipment & Supplies (Haddon) for advice on how to equip the laundry — and as it has grown — how to keep pace. Haddon is a full-service laundry equipment distributor and chemical supplier in Vancouver, B.C.

“Haddon has been instrumental in providing excellent direction for setting us up for success,” said Armstrong. “We feel like they treat us like family and honestly have best intentions in mind with all suggestions and directions.”

“We started small as we weren’t sure of how much business was out there,” added Wheeler. “We quickly evolved and got very busy with just three Continental washers and complementing dryers. Soon after, we added two more of each to the mix.”

In the beginning, the laundry didn’t iron. One person sorted laundry and two people filled machines and folded. As business soared, Whistler Laundry moved from running one shift per day, to two.

Automation Step 1 — Express Ironer Bolsters Production & Quality

At the laundry’s two-year mark — and a production threshold — Haddon’s Tom Phillips suggested elevating productivity and quality by adding a 130-inch Continental X20 Express Heated-Roll Ironer with integrated folder and two 75-pound capacity washers. The laundry took its first automation step.

The 20-inch diameter ironer’s wax-less design and ability to finish goods straight from the washer allowed Whistler Laundry to more quickly process flatwork goods with three to four operators. It automatically finished and partially folded everything from napkins and sheets to duvets and table linens. Operators fed items into the ironer and then performed the final cross fold and stacking. “Our clients noticed the quality,” said Wheeler. “We picked up new and larger customers with several thousand pounds of linen per day.”

“The ironer processed 1-1.25 sheets-per-minute,” added Armstrong, “and increased overall production by 30 percent. It also gave us a better finished product.”



A Laundry Fire's Silver Lining

Business boomed once again, but in 2015, an unexpected fire wreaked havoc. "We had a spontaneous combustion fire from spa linens," said Wheeler. "While we didn't suffer damage to the building, the smoke and water damage from the sprinklers left us with no other option but to replace all of our machinery." Leading up to the fire, the business had once again hit a production ceiling.

"The fire was unfortunate," added Armstrong, "but it allowed us to invest more into the company and purchase new soft-mount washers and dryers and the Compact." Now, the laundry's equipment mix included five soft-mount washers ranging from 70- to 40-pound capacities, four 75-pound capacity dryers, and a Compact 5-in-One Ironing System.

Automation Step 2 — The Compact Delivers

Featuring a compact design and flexibility that allows Whistler Laundry to automatically feed, iron, fold and stack a variety of items using up to four lanes, the Compact fits perfectly into its designated spot at the laundry. Configurable for one, two or four working lanes, with one lane for sheets, two for table linens and four for small items, including napkins and pillowcases, it executes up to three-lane primary folds and single- or two-lane cross folds. A bypass option allows goods to exit the front or rear of the machine, and the Compact offers left or right discharge and front or rear stacker orientation to meet specific needs. Finally, it automatically adjusts ironing speed and moisture removal — processing goods with no dryer preconditioning.

"Our first ironer improved production and revenue 30 percent," said Wheeler. "The new Compact elevated it another 30 percent." The Compact has opened the floodgates to new business and bigger clients.

"We use different programs for different item types, including round, square or huge rectangle tablecloths," added Wheeler. Set to run at speeds of 33 feet-per-minute no matter the item type, the Compact processes 150 sheets, 400 pillowcases and 400 napkins per hour for Whistler Laundry. "You can set up a program to stack a certain number of items," added Wheeler. "I like that function." Two to three operators feed items and then bag them in stacks of 10.

"Quality of the finished product with the Compact is very, very good," maintains Armstrong. "Technically we run 24/7, so labor hours are relatively constant, but we've managed to slim down one position per shift — lowering labor costs by 25-30 percent."

The productivity difference between the laundry's Express Ironer and the Compact is significant. "With the Express Ironer we were getting 1-1.25 sheets-per-minute and had to cross fold manually," said Armstrong. "With the Compact we are three to four plus sheets-per-minute with no additional handling." It used to take up to four hours to process 200 sheets, but with the new washers and the Compact, it takes just one hour.

Customer service and product quality has improved, as well. "The finish is really good and now we can get linen back to customers in 24 hours," said Wheeler.

Moving Forward with Growth

Through a stepped approach to laundry automation, Whistler Laundry has grown every aspect of its business without overspending. "They had a concept, bought small equipment to get themselves going, and then built more productivity into the laundry as they grew," said Phillips.

"We've grown way quicker than we expected," admits Wheeler. "Not even four years into it, we employ more than 30 people and run three shifts. We're getting close to a production threshold again as we are very, very busy. The next logical step in automation might be a tunnel system so we can serve even larger hotels."

"Our clients noticed the quality. We picked up new and larger customers with several thousand pounds of linen per day."

— Steve Wheeler, Co-Owner
Whistler Laundry

To discover more about Whistler Laundry, visit whistlerlaundry.com. For more information about GI laundry equipment, visit girbauindustrial.com or call 800-256-1073.