



How installing autosorting rallied Wildman's troops

Autosorting: recipe for exceeding expectations

By Ken Koepper

Classic arguments in favor of installing a fully automated clean garment sorting system persuaded Wildman Uniform and Linen to invest in this technology nearly a decade ago. The Warsaw, Ind. company's management knew that production accuracy and labor efficiency would increase. The system would also easily reveal customers' garment consumption, proving Wildman was billing them fairly and giving the company unmatched credibility in its market.

Those outcomes did indeed materialize. To some degree, owner Brent Wildman felt he had little choice but to seek to accomplish them, believing the seven-figure expenditure in automated sorting was needed to ensure a prosperous future for an independent company in a chain-dominated marketplace. But neither he nor his staff foresaw the gains that were ahead for the operation; how the technology would mix with other business practices to create a recipe for success beyond their expectations.

Today, rental garment volume has nearly tripled. The operation outgrew the first-ever SoftSort installation from Softrol Systems (Acworth, Ga.) and replaced it with a larger one from Softrol two and a half years ago. Wildman's team credits the technology for doing not only what it was supposed to, but for enabling the company to grow economically. It's been the catalyst for expansion, helping to build the staff's ongoing confidence that a single-plant company can serve an ever-increasing number of customers better than anyone else who might try.

CEO Steve Bryant notes that automated sorting generates data that can energize your marketing effort and give you all kinds of great ideas about how to grow your business. "We could generate 100 different reports," he says, "and we do use some of that data." But the real benefits are the basic tracking and productivity gains that arise from converting from manual sorting.

"We never could have grown like we have without installing the system. To see the enormous number of pieces that we process every week with two people, four days a week, is just incredibly inspirational." And when you can tell your customers with 99 percent certainty about how they use their garments, you add a higher level of accountability to the business relationship that they much appreciate.

Joshua Wildman, operations VP, remembers Brent (his father) calculating the payback from the investment in the original system knowing that it would spark labor savings and business growth and enable the company avoid having to provide customers with "shortage" garments unnecessarily. Because the technology would enable the company to easily track every deployed and reused garment, there would be no question of whether a wearer had returned one to the company for laundering. If one didn't come back, it couldn't be washed and sent back to the account, so the wearer couldn't accuse the laundry of "shorting" the item on delivery day.

"Today, we have almost no shortage garments to fill," Josh says. "And the system is the leading factor in our sales presentation for uniform rental." The initial reduction in sorting labor has been a great benefit, but the real plus has come from increased sales, which paid the system off more quickly than anticipated.

"The system becomes more efficient with the more you sell, and that's where you really get your payback," he explains. "If you stay status quo—processing the same number of garments per week for an indefinite period of time—your payback comes from only labor savings."

If you grow a little, those savings increase, but you experience diminishing returns in this respect as you reach full capacity of the system. On the other hand, if you can rally your troops and grow rental business fast, your payback increases noticeably. Wildman's mentality has been: "let's see how close we can get this system to its full capacity as soon as possible and our return will come that much quicker."

Brent made the initial deal for the technology from Clipper Systems in 1998. That operation went out of business before the installation. However, Softrol, which had acquired Clipper's autosort assets, honored the down payment, applying it toward the purchase of Softrol's newly developed autosort technology.

Wildman had just acquired a chunk of business from National Linen Service and was ready to consolidate that work into the Wildman plant. The launderer had yet to appoint a staff project manager for the autosort project, however, so the job ahead would be to tame a two-headed monster.

"Between acquiring the routes, installing the system, and combining the plants, it was a disaster," Josh recalls. It was hoped that starting the autosort technology would be like "turning a key and it would work," but instead, there was "a huge learning curve." Once he took the time to understand all aspects of the system and what was required to run it efficiently, however, earning the return on investment was in sight.

Also complicating the situation was the fact that it was Softrol's first autosort installation. "They had just acquired the Clipper business, so it was pretty new to them." Josh effectively became the project manager and "for six months, it was my job to make it work, and we did it."

Six months previously, Leslie Wildman (Josh's wife) led the effort to begin labeling each garment with a bar code. Radio frequency ID chips were available at the time, but the technology wasn't proven effective in autosorting and the cost per chip was high. Bar coding seemed like a manageable job with just 12,000 garments circulating each week. The plant simply

switched the labels on one route per week for a couple of months.

Both the old and new systems require just the two full-time operators. With larger volume, the Tie-Out Station from Plas-Ties (Tustin, Calif.) has been a help on the back end. It ties bundles as the operator unloads garments grouped by wearer from a trolley. Thus, it's not completely automatic: "you've still got to have somebody there because somebody's got to send the trolley," Josh explains. However, Wildman is looking into the more automated system that Plas-Ties has recently introduced.

Wildman's front-line person in automation is Anne Blair, a veteran of more than a decade with the company who was a highly effective manual sorter. When the first autosorting technology was about to arrive, "we told her we wanted to train her to run the system, that we'd give her a raise." She had the technical savvy that rated a 40 percent pay premium compared with the company's standard for a plant worker of her experience.

"She really knows the system; she can hear when it's not running right," Josh says. The same goes for Jennifer Lastname, who is the second individual in the company's history to work the back end. "You can tell from our numbers when one of them is on vacation."

Choosing the right tech-savvy personnel for the job is a big part of using the technology successfully, he says. "We give them ownership and leadership in it, letting them know what's going to be rewarded and expected.

"You can't just choose anybody; you've got to look for people with talent and the level of computer knowledge required. At the very least, the operators can't be frightened of computers." He continues, "If you get into this, you'd better find an 'Anne' and you'd better realize this isn't going to be a 30-day project. To receive the kinds of benefits we're enjoying today, you have to work at it. You can't just choose someone who was feeding your ironer the day before and say, 'Run this system.'"

Since the advent of autosorting, management feels they have upgraded personnel across the board, especially for uniform work in their stockroom. This is a computer-intensive area as well, as systems are run by route accounting software from Alliant Systems, Irving, Texas.

Automation doesn't mean operators can stop thinking about processes. An example: hand-scanning bar code labels. "It's a manual activity and people can get tired or distracted and miss garments," Josh notes. A garment that's identified as extra (a 12th when a wearer is only paying for 11 to be circulated) or requires repair will automatically be routed for proper handling. Accuracy in ensuring such items reach their proper destinations in the plant is essentially guaranteed. "The computer never gets tired."

The system outperforms hanging and washroom operations. "It puts our products through the plant rather than being the roadblock." In many instances, a plant's sorting area can be a bottleneck, so work backs up from it. At Wildman, though, any indication that the sorting system is idling suggests it's time to rally the rest of the plant. As long as it's not over capacity, it speeds overall throughput.

System maintenance hasn't required any staff upgrades. "It's very basic. We just had to change our mindset and realize it would require more maintenance than anything else in the plant." Because this was Josh's pet project for some time, he was personally involved in keeping the system running smoothly. That responsibility has since shifted to Plant Manager Todd Deaton.

Not that the system always ran perfectly! "For a long time, if there was a problem, they called me," Josh says. "But as you start to build history in dealing with issues, you're able to diagnose problems and realize what's going on." These may be maintenance issues, but they require management attention.

Ever since the first system's installation, Wildman has concentrated on gauging the technology's performance. The company can measure every aspect of the system "to ensure it's firing on all cylinders." This includes the number of mis-sorts and how many of them made it through the system to tie-out.

"We know scan efficiencies, total garments produced, which ones are fit in by hand, those that have to be escorted, and more," he adds. Operators turn in performance test reports every day along with proof of basic preventive maintenance.

All accomplish one principal objective: to show customers that when they don't receive an item they expect, it's not because the laundry has shorted them. Josh points to the importance of Bryant's "what gets measured gets managed" mantra. When you use autosorting, you can quantify what you do for customers and explain it to them, fostering increased satisfaction that will likely be reflected in your steadily bigger, happier returns.