

# TEXTILE RENTAL

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Fabric Trends

## Bed Linen Breakthrough —100% Polyester!

*One laundry system saves \$15,000 annually with polyester sheets that get rave reviews from customers*

By Ruth Davis



*Healthcare and hospitality managers understand that sheets can influence a patient or guest's perception of quality. Polyester sheets like the ones shown above can deliver that value with outstanding comfort, as well as superior durability and a 'stay white' appearance that outperforms poly/cotton sheets.*

For decades, polyester was mostly offered as a blend to increase the strength and durability of bed linens, while reducing drying times. Typically, the pure fiber wasn't offered because it wasn't suited for processing in large laundries or ironing, and it didn't absorb or wick moisture. Laundries are now reporting dramatic improvements in synthetic-fabric bed linens. Today's polyester sheets are as comfortable as cotton, have superior soil release, wash well, stay bright white, last longer, stain less and save energy through faster drying. Take a closer look at some informative feedback from TRSA members who've recently discovered the untapped potential in polyester.

### Crossover from cotton

While cotton/polyester blended fabric sheeting has been a mainstay in the healthcare industry due to its durability and softness, the demand for pure polyester fabrics is growing. Several healthcare and hospitality companies are making the change to this newly improved textile and finding it favorable for many reasons.

Robert Mishkin, co-founder and vice president of marketing for Comphy Co., Los Angeles, cites the positive attributes of 100% polyester. "These sheets are soft and will remain soft for the life of the sheet," he says. While cotton sheeting is measured in thread count, polyester is measured in denier, or weight of the filaments. In general, the higher the denier, the finer the filament—the finer the

filament, the softer the 'hand.' He also touts its durability, noting that polyester sheets last two to three times as long as a cotton or cotton/poly sheet and weigh less than a cotton/cotton poly sheet. That, in turn, means more sheets per wash load, plus faster drying.

Susan Witcher, president and CEO of Faultless Laundry Co., Kansas City, MO, recently made the shift to polyester fabric bed linens. Faultless managers converted their St. Louis plant to these products less than a year ago. "Sheets are the toughest item to quality control in a laundry because of their size and the automation involved in our processes," says Witcher. "These sheets are whiter, resistant to staining and tearing, and don't shrink—so we are delivering a superior quality product to our customers."

Crown Laundry, Pensacola, FL, is another facility that converted both of their large healthcare facilities to polyester bed linens about a year ago. Rick Hamlin, Crown's vice president of operations, says that this synthetic material, "wears better and holds its bright white characteristics for much longer than cotton."

### Fabric performance

Mark Whitaker, senior vice president of Medline Industries Inc., Mundelein, IL, says that the perception of polyester is changing, especially in the nursing sector. While most of the industry leaned toward cotton for its softness and absorbency, "the polyester fabrics of today also can have these same characteristics, but with several key benefits for both the hospital and the laundry."

This new polyester product that Medline calls PerforMAX is manufactured from yarns that are specially altered to wick away liquids. "This makes the fabric feel as if it absorbs moisture and also makes it very soft, Whitaker says. PerforMAX also remains bright white as it ages, creating the perception that the product is a higher quality item. Since hospitals are more concerned with patient satisfaction than ever before, a high perception of linen quality is important," says Whitaker.

Several years ago, Deborah Lark, president of Portland Hospital Services Corp., Portland, OR, switched to polyester products from cotton-rich bed linens. Lark says that this change and product implementation has been, "very positive and well-liked by healthcare workers—very positive results in the laundry." Lark also favors the lack of shrinkage and low stain rate that the product offers. Overall, the change has served their facility "very well—highly energy efficient and helped to increased production."

Witcher adds that, "They are heavier, whiter and have a great hand to them. The upgrade to this product had a very positive reaction from our customers." Hospitals are asking for textiles that can help them differentiate themselves from their competition, she adds.

Mishkin says customers often prefer the polyester sheets to cotton. "If it were not for a perceived negativity, these sheets would replace cotton or cotton blends, in my opinion."

### Transition issues

While companies are reveling in polyester preference, it's natural to encounter some challenges in transition. Mishkin reveals that, "There have been a few isolated instances where these sheets have been unable to process through the ironer because of roller heat or speed. This has been reported with older equipment."

Crown Laundry's Hamlin faced a different type of obstacle in that polyester bed linens cost 50% more, and "electrodes and tape stains can ruin sheets that have a lot of life left in them, while folders struggle to fold because they are so slick."

Whitaker notes the static buildup that occurs whenever a laundry processes polyester. "Fortunately, there are already a large numbers of laundries that process spun-poly table linen. We have borrowed from them for solutions to running PerforMAX," he says. "Adding static bars to the irons, using blended tapes on the iron (rather than 100% poly tapes) and lowering the amount of alkali in the wash

formula all help to manage static." Due to the relative 'slickness' of PerforMAX, Whitaker suggests wrapping the rollers of a cross-folder with rubberized tape, so that they grab the product better.

Another challenge facing laundries is how to integrate this new product with their existing sheet and pillowcase pool. Over the last three years, the laundries that have begun to use the product have successfully mixed them with blended-fabric sheets. As

mentioned above, a static bar may be added to an iron and a cross-folder may need some adjustment. However, Whitaker contends that they are not seeing any serious problems with running PerforMAX products in the same loads as blended products. "The laundries involved are running their irons at the speed required to dry the blended items. They are not seeing the benefit of improved production times until the product mix is 100% PerforMAX, but they are benefiting from longer product life and lower rewash rates."

### Cost-savings salute

Among the key objectives for introducing any new healthcare textile product is to lower production costs, while enhancing customer and end user satisfaction. With polyester sheets, so far, all signs point to greater revenue. Witcher notes that, "The finishing quality coming out of the ironer is excellent." As the polyester fabric doesn't require conditioning in the dryer, Faultless Laundry saves on energy costs. "Additionally, the loads do not rope or tangle as much, so when the sling load drops behind the ironer, it falls apart better, which improves productivity and is safer for our employees," says Witcher. "We expect to see lower replacement costs because the sheets will last longer."

As Hamlin continues the evaluation process, Crown Laundry has effectively replaced about 70% of its rental pool and has noticed that customers are pleased with the improved whiteness.

### New Product Review

Testing on PerforMAX sheets and pillowcases reveals the following:

- Polyester items can retain as much as 96% of their original weight after as many as 300 washes vs. a top-quality blended sheet that only retains about 90% of its weight after as few as 20 washes.
- There is virtually no lint produced, so there are lower amounts of solid waste generated that the laundry has to screen out.
- Weight retention has a corresponding level of higher tensile strength, so that the sheets resist tears and pinholes (for knitted sheets) longer.
- The life expectancy of these sheets is two to three times longer than with blended products.

## Case Studies

**Mike Reppucci, vice president of distribution,  
Angelica Textile Services, Lorain, OH**

About three years ago, we bought approximately 1,800 PerforMAX PC from Medline because in the new state they looked much whiter and were bigger than our standard PC at the time. Once we put them in the system, we noticed that they were very easy to identify—they were dazzling white versus the usual dull white PC color. After about three months and still being able to ‘readily see the difference,’ we removed all the old-style pillowcases and replaced them with PerforMAX. Since this transition, we have seen improvement in the following:

- Number of servings on pillowcases
- Less staining
- Absolutely no graying of pillowcases
- Energy savings

Couple that with comments that we've heard first-hand from customers regarding the whiteness of this product and how easily they go over the pillow. I'd say this product has been a winner for everyone.

**Deborah Lark, president of Portland Hospital  
Services Corp., Portland, OR**

Portland Hospital Service Corp. (PHSC) is a cooperative laundry in Oregon that processes over 23 million lbs. annually. They service 13 hospitals and 60 medical/dental clinics, and have been in business for 38 years. PHSC owns their textiles and rents products to their customers. They charge by the pound.

PHSC was facing several challenges: increasing energy costs, shrinking linens and a high percentage of rewashes and rag-outs. Two years ago, this facility began ordering PerforMAX (100% synthetic) flat sheets to combat their bottlenecks and problem areas in the laundry. With over a quarter of the linen pool consisting of flat sheets, any improvements would generate great benefits to their bottom line. Lark sought any opportunity to reduce the amount of rag-outs. Many things can contribute to rag-outs, such as staining, fabric degrada-

tion, yellowing, tears and excess shrinkage.

PHSC was running all blended sheets (55% cotton/45% poly and 70% cotton/30% poly) before implementing PerforMAX. A visit was made to the laundry in May 2008, two years after PHSC initially implemented the PerforMAX sheets. After injecting the initial quantities of PerforMAX sheets, PHSC had to dedicate one engineer to work with the machines to process the new sheets properly. It took four to five days to adjust the folders and ironers so there were no glitches. The main adjustments were to add tracking tape on the belts of the folder to provide a better grip on the sheets and to replace the ribbons on the ironer with rubberized ribbon.

1. Since implementing PerforMAX, PHSC has noticed a dramatic reduction in staining, yellowing and tearing—the primary causes of rag-outs. PHSC has seen their rag-out rate go from 7% down to 2%, a 71% decrease.
2. PHSC has experienced a 16% decrease in monthly replacement costs due to the longer life of PerforMAX.
3. PHSC runs their ironers at the fastest speed, 170 feet per minute, instead of 120 feet per minute, representing a 42% increase.
4. The faster dry times of PerforMAX has allowed PHSC to cut their conditioning time in half from four to two minutes.
5. Lark is delighted that she has found a product that is whiter, does not shrink and has greatly improved customer satisfaction at the hospitals and clinics that PHSC services.
6. Overall PHSC estimates that they are saving \$15,000 annually by utilizing PerforMAX synthetic sheets.

Lark realizes that no change would be successful without the approval of her customers at the numerous hospitals and clinics that PHSC services. Before implementing the product, she received frequent phone calls from customers with complaints on the blended sheets. Lark is delighted that she is now able to offer her customers a sheet that is whiter, brighter, keeps its size and weight throughout the life of the product and has greatly improved customer satisfaction.

Making the shift to PerforMAX products, Portland Hospital Services claims that their rag-out rate for sheets fell from 7% to 2%. The laundry's replacement dollars spent for sheets dropped by 16% per month with PerforMAX. Lark says the savings include less natural gas for drying, increased production and longevity, which reduces replacement costs.

Whitaker points out the energy-saving advantages of polyester. “Less water, less chemicals,” he says. Whitaker also hypothesizes that, “If loss rates of an item are under control, there are considerable savings available with PerforMAX sheets and pillowcases. While the purchase prices of PerforMAX sheets are certainly higher than that of a blended product, the life expectancy as a percentage of the purchase price is also significantly higher than for blends.”

### Trend watch

As the healthcare and hospitality markets grow more accepting of a 100% polyester product in their bed linens, many members are speculating about its expansion into other areas. Witcher says, “This

product is appropriate for any patient-care area in a hospital.” Maternity wards could offer another excellent venue for polyester bed linens, Mishkin says. “The new mother is expecting comfort and luxury. Sheets are often the first contact with the hospital experience and are one of the few items that convey the message of luxury and comfort.”

As for the future of PerforMAX, Whitaker says that the increased interest and demand for their sheets and pillowcases has prompted Medline to move ahead with other synthetic products. “PerforMAX incontinent pads and scrubwear are very popular new items. Medline is also developing synthetic surgical towels, patient gowns and bath blankets. A bath towel with a higher blend rate of polyester is also in the works,” he says. TR



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from dealing with **rag-outs, rewashes, yellow linen, and high energy costs?**

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- Guaranteed to last 3 years
- Retains "out of box" whiteness for life of product
- Superior stain resistance
- Energy efficient including reduced dry times by at least 40%



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