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Drycleaning's Decline Is Permanent

[Bob Mach](#) | December 10, 2010

The “State of The Industry” is not good, one longtime distributor writes in response to our October report, and operators are going to have to find new ways to prosper in it.

CREVE COEUR, Mo. — The percentage of people who never use drycleaning is now higher than the percentage that does. Even the number of infrequent users (once every one to three months) has fallen. Anecdotal information says that these declines are consistent throughout the Midwest. Many cleaners say they have the same number of customers, but they bring in fewer garments per visit.

In a tough market, clothing manufacturers avoid making garments with a “Dryclean only” label, since they know it keeps consumers from purchasing such items. And lower-priced clothing means that the cost of drycleaning looks expensive relative to the cost of replacement.

The trend towards less-formal attire has been the principal cause of the downturn in drycleaning volume. The growing acceptance of casual clothing in the workplace seems to be permanent. Smoking bans have also

impacted drycleaning sales, since smoke odors remain in clothing, and fewer nonsmokers must have their garments cleaned after being in smoke-filled rooms.

Worse still, manufacturers are developing "memory-sensitive" fabrics to eliminate wrinkles in home laundering. Some home dryers now have a "steam" cycle to improve garments' appearance without ironing.

Already heavily regulated on environmental issues, the industry will continue to face more stringent controls. Eventually, this will reduce the number of drycleaners that can maintain financial viability.

Operators are turning to the centralized-plant-and-drop-store model that was popular before the advent of perchloroethylene. More shopping centers refuse to rent to drycleaners that use perc, and know what Phase I and Phase II environmental studies are. The cost of conversion from perc is often beyond the means of many drycleaners.

The outlook is bleak. There will be survivors, but survival through attrition does not guarantee a prosperous future. Most cleaners have been in decline for four years or more, averaging a 5% decrease in 2006, long before the beginning of the recession; 2009 was the worst decline in history, with an average loss of 26%.

In five years, the industry has lost 46% of its gross sales, and manufacturers have consolidated, too. Respected companies such as Ajax, Hoyt, Cissell, Marvel, Vic and others have disappeared or been bought out.

The value of used equipment has fallen since so many plants have gone under and left an excess of it. Many plants just lock their doors and call the local scrap dealer.

When the economy improves, there may be a short reprieve. Previous downturns did not affect the drycleaning industry dramatically, but the current recession has affected everyone, including the affluent families that use drycleaning services the most.

We must acknowledge the fact that our industry has changed forever. We must find more efficient ways to produce a quality garment and show a value for our services. Culture and style continue to evolve, and we must accept these changes and find ways to prosper in a new environment.

About the author

Bob Mach

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President

Bob Mach is president of Mach Distributors.

Comments

Bob, you are correct, I

Submitted by adminATM on [Sat, 2013-06-08 15:03](#)

Bob,

you are correct, I blame the low cost (relatively) of entering the business and a lack of government permitting.

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