

Linencraft: Flying High in Dubai

Quality, customized service satisfies airline, hospitality & healthcare clients in this city in the United Arab Emirates

By Jack Morgan

“I’m just passionate about laundering,” says Victor Bastian, assistant vice president for Linencraft, a division of Emirates Flight Catering. While Linencraft is a key player in the fast-growing Emirate of Dubai, Bastian believes that competition is healthy because it allows Linencraft to differentiate itself in terms of quality and service. With that in mind, he’s eager to discuss the reasons for this company’s dramatic growth in Dubai, which is one of seven member states in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

“There are two things we will never compromise on, quality and flexibility of services,” says Bastian, a veteran of commercial laundering with over 30 years of experience. “Our success can be credited to our openness to ‘change’ and our embrace of new technology. We have identified and procured the best technology and the most efficient machines. We have built strong partnerships with entities who share the same values and vision as us, be it equipment, chemicals or other service partners. We have built a dedicated and competent team that helps us to stand out. Finally, when a potential client approaches us for laundry services, we go the extra mile by providing a comprehensive solution, not just laundry services. This is what Linencraft is all about.”

Textile Services visited Dubai earlier this year to see how this company is pursuing growth amid

the challenges of a rapidly growing market in the southeastern corner of the Persian Gulf. We toured three plants, dubbed Linencraft (or LC) 1, 2 and 3, processing in excess of 2,618,000 lbs. per week. We also learned about plans for significant additional expansions to meet this company’s rapidly expanding demand for additional capacity over the next few years. Highlights of our visit, including excerpts from an interview with Bastian and Muhammad Tariq, assistant vice president-engineering, appear below.

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AIRPORT LAUNDRY EXPANSION

Prior to 2004, Linencraft operated exclusively in a plant located in the Dubai International Airport. Its mission initially was to focus on processing various airline linen classifications for its parent company, Emirates Flight Catering. As the city’s economy and air traffic increased, the old plant reached its capacity.

Plans were laid for a larger airline laundry facility, dubbed Linencraft 1, to be established a few miles away in the Dubai Investments Park (DIP).

“We had a small plant at the airport. It was a 5-ton laundry, which was subsequently upgraded to a 10-ton plant,” Bastian says. “We used to process airline laundry at that time and then due to the growth of the airline industry, in particular Emirates Airlines, we had to design and build a new state-of-the-art industrial laundry plant to cater to this growth. We realized that



An employee places plastic wrap over a stack of towels that are ready for packout and delivery to Linencraft customers.

for an 80-ton plant, we didn't have the area at the airport; hence we had to build one off-site."

Plans for LC 1 got underway with an opening 18 months later. "We eventually commissioned the airline laundry plant in 2006," he says. "It had an initial installed capacity of 45 tons per day. We were processing about 18 tons of airline linen per day when we moved in, which left us with a spare capacity of about 25 tons." A majority of all airline laundry collected from the airport is returned within 14 hours. With this taken into consideration, the plant was designed with a lot of contingencies because of the stringent service delivery schedules of the airline business.

Within three months, Emirates Flight Catering had set its sights higher regarding the laundry division. In addition to airline linen, the division

also could immediately target Dubai's growing hospitality market. This idea of running a hospitality laundry plant was actually part of a long-term plan, but the plant was developed specifically for processing airline laundry. "Although we had additional capacity to spare, processing hospitality laundry was different from airline classifications, even requiring different machinery," Bastian recalls. "We had to revisit the plant design and equipment available to accommodate the hospitality classifications."

The company wasn't deterred. In fact they invested in additional equipment within six months of commissioning the plant, to enable expansion into the hospitality laundry business. The rest is history.

There were two primary reasons behind the expansion, Bastian explains.

First, Dubai was experiencing rapid growth in its tourism industry. New hotels were opening, and this presented an excellent opportunity for laundry outsourcing. Second, while there were many small independent laundries in Dubai, demand was quickly outstripping capacity. Some companies were operating above their installed capacity, which had a direct impact on quality. "Basically, you had all these small laundries operating, and with the number of hotels being commissioned year after year, no one had the capacity to handle these volumes," Bastian says. "Also, as Dubai lacked large industrial laundry plants, this led to a case of a major supply and demand imbalance."

Linencraft has always focused on providing high-quality service for its clients. As this focus expanded to include more hospitality customers, plans for additional expansions soon followed.

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“In 2007, June, we ran a quick forecast and realized that soon we would run out of capacity,” Bastian says. “We were growing at a significant pace on the hospitality front, and would soon have to encroach on the equipment dedicated for the airline volumes. We had initially planned a second-phase expansion of 35 tons for the airline volumes in December 2009. We realized that to cope with the massive growth of our hospitality business, we would have to bring this expansion forward to 2007 and dedicate it to hospitality volume instead of airline volume.”

Unfortunately, the growth that characterized the opening years of the 21st century would stall when the recession hit late in 2008. Linencraft continued to grow, but at a slower pace. “The airlines’ volumes were growing at an average of about 22% YOY; hospitality was growing around 150% when the crisis hit,” Bastian says. “Since 2009, we’ve been averaging a YOY growth of 35%.”

But even at a slower pace, growth continued to pose challenges, particularly in LC 1, which specializes in airline linen.

Around the time when the region was recovering from the recession, Linencraft embarked on its expansion of its second plant—LC 2, with an installed capacity of 90 tons, and a few months later the third plant—LC 3, dedicated for high-end garment processing. Linencraft also ventured into the

healthcare laundry business when they realized that they had the area within LC 2 to build a dedicated laundry for this business. “We realized we had a portion we could utilize to build a small 10-ton, dedicated healthcare laundry plant—to test the waters in the healthcare laundry business,” he says, noting that in this market, healthcare laundry margins are higher than hospitality margins.

COMMITMENT TO STAFF

While Linencraft has focused on keeping pace with growth—ensuring workplace safety and conserving natural resources wherever possible are also key goals. “Safety is the group’s top priority, and this applies to our entire portfolio, from laundering to catering to all our systems and services,” says Tariq, Linencraft’s assistant vice president-engineering. “We are committed to preventing accidents, injuries and illnesses related to work, and to protect employees, contractors and others involved along the value chain.” Linencraft businesses and its three plants are OHSAS 18001:2007 certified. “We got this in 2012,” Tariq says. “Our Occupational Health and Safety management system is based on the concept of continuous improvement. We improve our performance constantly by designing and adapting processes, work best practices and systems in direction of better ergonomics and greater safety. We have best-in-class records, especially in LC 3, with 900-plus safe days without any lost-time injury.” Prior

to this certification, Linencraft plants were awarded the 5 star Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) recognition for three consecutive years, a feat difficult to match.

“To be at the forefront of accident prevention in the industry, we implement in all our sites the mandatory Occupational Health & Safety Management System, which includes periodic self-assessments and specific audits,” Tariq says. “This meets or exceeds the requirements of the local and international health and safety regulations.

“We commit to perform systematic identification of hazards and to manage them with appropriate risk assessments and subsequent actions to minimize danger. We establish emergency and contingency plans to deal with residual risks. This approach also minimizes threats to the business, protecting our shareholders’ interests.

“Coaching, training and equipping employees to ensure that they are empowered to avoid unsafe situations and to respond rapidly to unexpected events is especially important because the entire staff comes from outside Dubai.” Mainly, employees and contractors are recruited in South Asian countries, as well as the Philippines and several African countries.

In addition to wages, employers here typically provide housing and various perks to expat workers who labor for Linencraft and other large companies. “We have our own accommodation,” Tariq says. “Employees can stay here; we do provide them meals, transportation and sports activities. Plus, after two years there is an air ticket for their annual vacation for two months. They accumulate their vacations.”

We drove past some of these employee housing units. They looked like large

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apartment blocks—not luxurious, but modern and functional. As for health-care, employees have access to clinics and doctors, courtesy of Linencraft. “We have our own clinic,” Tariq says, noting that employees use the clinic, or get referred to hospitals.

These programs have helped Linencraft keep a skilled and motivated staff at all levels, even as the company has grown its operations. “Getting in the right people with the right attitude is very important to us,” Bastian says.

Tariq’s eyes brightened when we ask how he ended up working for Linencraft. “I applied through a recruitment website,” he says. “I applied from the Caribbean specifically to this job. I

submitted my CV online and I was called for the first telephonic screening interview. Then it began and the whole recruitment system came in place. I had gone through several telephonic interviews and online psychometric tests, until I was shortlisted and brought to Dubai for detailed intelligence and psychometric tests followed by senior management interviews.”

As for longevity, Bastian says the plant has many longtime employees. “I reckon around 50% have been with us 15 years or more,” he says. “We have some staff who have been with us for 30 years as well. Some employees, who leave our services, often want to return to be part of the team and our success story.”

QUALITY & CONSERVATION FOCUS

Keeping employees motivated and trained to do their jobs safely and well is important because it helps ensure the high quality and efficiency demands noted above. Linencraft documents its linen whiteness quality with a reflector meter that measures the whiteness of its textiles, which is at an average level of 94%. “Ninety-four percent is an industry high,” Bastian says. “Some of the European laundries maintain whiteness levels between 88%– 90%. We also do carry out random-swab tests. All the articles have always passed.” Various airlines and hotels have audited Linencraft’s standards and processes.

Clockwise from top, (l/r) A dry-cleaning wash wheel in action; a group of three washer/extractors; an employee feeds flatwork into folding equipment; a view of the plant’s chemical-injection system and stored chemicals.



Tariq adds that quality here is achieved with an equal focus on sustainability. “Environmental sustainability is one of our key objectives,” he says. “The board of directors is always looking into environmental sustainability and carbon-emission reduction initiatives. We aim to use the most efficient technologies and apply best practices in order to further optimize energy and water consumption, and minimize waste generation.

Examples include a major investment in water recycling, with the most modern equipment available provided by AquaRecycle’s ARROW Reverse Osmosis System. “Our major goal was to save more than 50-60%, and we have done that in LC 2; in LC 1, it is in the beginning stages,” Tariq says. “You can see the commitment, and you can see the huge investment we’ve made right away in water recycling. We were doing it to a small extent before. All the CBW (continuous batch washers) equipment had recovery tanks. But for sure that was at a very small scale. With this water-recycling system, we went into a major investment. All the water coming from the laundry operations is going through a different set of specific processes. This is another example of Linencraft’s strong commitment to water conservation. For future investments and installations, water recycling has to be an integral part of the operation.”

He adds that, “A similar effort is underway with energy, using modern, energy-saving plant equipment, plus additional measures such as low-energy lighting, variable-speed motors, energy-efficient motors, and an ambitious project to utilize the condensate’s heat energy to produce chilled water in Absorption Chillers. This chilled water will be used for building air conditioning. In this way, we will switch off

existing split air conditioners, saving 40-50% of electricity costs in summer and bringing a more comfortable and pleasant environment for employees.”

Switching to more environmentally friendly fuels can make a difference as well. “Another thing we’ve done in LC 2 recently, we converted our boilers from diesel to LPG (liquefied petroleum gas),” Tariq says. “That is also linked with our environmental sustainability. If you calculate the calorific values and carbon emissions coming from diesel to LPG, there’s a huge difference.”

PLANT HIGHLIGHTS

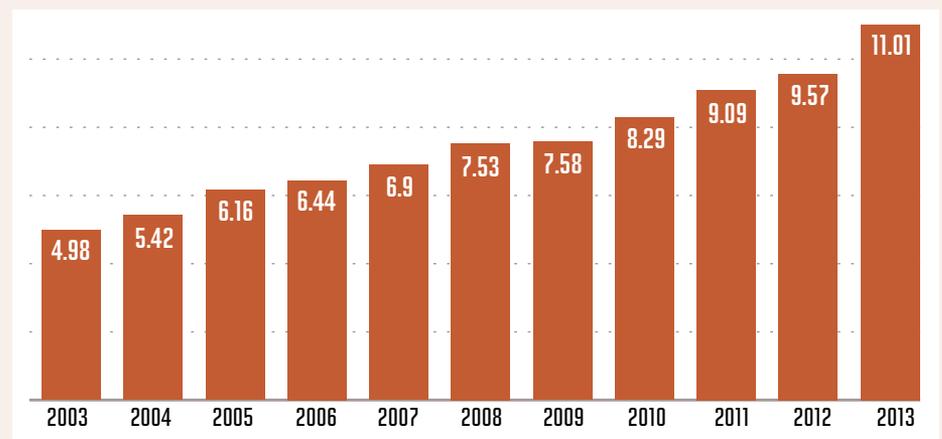
When touring the three Linencraft plants now in operation (LC 1, 2 and 3), a visitor gets a sense of perpetual motion. Washer extractors and tunnels are spinning; employees are feeding ironers, or hand ironing high-quality apparel items. While the complex features automated sheet feeding and other high-tech efficiencies that would rival those in many U.S. plants, you also see monorail conveyors and people moving carts or loading trucks by hand. And they are in constant motion.

LC 1 processes laundry volumes for over 47 different airlines that operate out of Dubai, Bastian says. Anyone who flies even occasionally would recognize the passenger blankets neatly stacked next to a folding machine, or a load of detached seatbelts that we saw soaking in a cleaning solution during processing.

Focusing on efficiencies is a key area of Linencraft business, but Bastian takes particular pride in the chemical injection, or “dosing” system that Linencraft uses from Burnus Hychem, a German company. “This is one of the most advanced dosing systems in the market today,” he says. “It’s very reliable and precise.” He explains that the system sends a signal to the washing equipment to put it into “pause” mode until there is proof of delivery. This feature ensures that rewash volumes are kept to a minimum. Linencraft has its chemicals delivered directly from Burnus in Germany.

Outside the plant, we see several Linencraft trucks with their trademark gold swish on a white background. The trucks feature writing in both Arabic and English. In addition to the

Dubai Hotel Guest Nos. 2003–2012



Source: Dubai government (www.dubaitourism.ae 2003–2012 guest nights [in millions]).

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airlines noted above, this fleet of vehicles service 50 hospitality accounts and over 14 hospitals. “It’s not just one trip a day,” Bastian says, noting that most of the company’s 59 trucks make multiple trips/stops to the same customers. In all, they travel roughly 18,400 km (11,433 miles) a day making over 305 trips a day. That’s an average of roughly 194 miles per truck, per day.

Another sight that catches our eye outside the LC 1 plant is a massive water storage tank, with a capacity of 1.3 million liters (343,423 gallons). It’s available to keep the washing process going, or for use in case of a fire in compliance with FM Global, insurance provider standards.

LC 2 has three Kannegiesser tunnels, each with 14, 50 kg. (110.2 lb.) compartments. Clean wet goods move via a conveyor for drying in 10, 50 kg. dryers. These are also from Kannegiesser, as is nearly all the washing, drying and finishing equipment. On the upper-level finishing side, there is one ironer line and 10 towel folders. Another area on a lower level has three more, high-end ironer lines. Barcodes are used for sorting in what Bastian describes as an “intelligent” system that tracks and group’s customer-owned goods (COG). All textiles here are COG, but

Linencraft is planning to launch a leasing initiative in 2015, he says.

In the downstairs processing area, we see automatic equipment that feeds 1,200 sheets an hour into the ironer. Hospitality customers who expect quality bed and bath linens should know that these textiles are serviced in a modern, 86,000-square-foot plant that runs three shifts, 24/7, processing over 150,000 lbs. a day. Bastian’s mission—and Linencraft’s—is to make sure that the company consistently meets these high-quality standards.

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“This [ARROW system filters] is the latest technology, first introduced in Miami last year. The recycled water coming out of the reverse osmosis system is drinkable.”
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The focus on saving water as the ultimate conservation goal in this Emirate comes into clear focus when we tour the water recycling system in LC 1 and 2. The AquaRecycle systems are similar to ones we’ve seen in the United States, such as at Wayne Memorial Hospital in Goldsboro, NC (see pg. 16, December 2013, *Textile Services*). However, this

unit is equipped with the company’s newest technology that includes both microfiltration and reverse osmosis. It features a Gyra Vib® shaker screen from Midwestern Industries Inc., and a series of filtering tanks, plus ozone injection and ultraviolet purification equipment. Randy Anderson, AquaRecycle’s chief technical officer, explains that the series of black-and-white vessels located a few feet from the main recycle system are part of their new ARROW line of equipment. These vessels comprise the microfiltration and reverse osmosis components. The ARROW system filters the recycled water to the highest level of purity possible, Anderson says. Each of the LC 1 and LC 2 systems process 200 gallons a minute. “This is the latest technology, first introduced in Miami last year,” Anderson says of the LC 2 installation. “The recycled water coming out of the reverse osmosis system is drinkable.”

VISION OF SUCCESS

Like life itself, few things are certain in the laundry business. Each company puts its reputation on the line for quality, service and value with each day’s deliveries. For Linencraft, its sharp focus in each of these areas—coupled with an emphasis on technology, resource conservation, teamwork, safety

(l/r) This equipment is part of a microfiltration/reverse osmosis system for water recycling; AquaRecycle execs: Milton Flores, Jeff Lebedin and Randy Anderson.



and more, enhances the odds of its continued growth. Jan Bijsterbosch, the senior vice president who oversees Linencraft for Emirates Flight Catering, says the laundry's growth reflects a focus on quality and commitment. "The success of Linencraft can be attributed to having dedicated people with 'laundry and Linencraft hearts,' its continuing drive for great customer service, the attention to detail when it comes to designing wash programs, resulting in whiteness levels above 95%, and having an investment strategy that clearly pays off."

This approach to textile services is significant because, like Linencraft, the Emirate of Dubai appears poised for continued growth—despite the political uncertainties in neighboring countries. With yearly growth averaging roughly 4.5% since the recession, Dubai has made headway in branding itself as a tourist destination and business center for the region. The area has some oil and oil-related commerce, but the government and private interests are looking beyond petroleum for growth. For example, Dubai recently was named as the host city for the World Expo 2020 event, a major source of pride and excitement here. "All business entities are gearing up for this major event," Bastian says.

Linencraft has organized its staff and facilities to grow right along with Dubai, as new hotels and other businesses continue to open here and draw more visitors. Keeping pace with this expansion doesn't require magic. But it does take a "washerman" like Bastian, along with Tariq and their teams, who have the skills and passion for excellence necessary to run a successful large-scale laundry in today's Dubai. TS

Jack Morgan is senior editor of Textile Services. Contact him at 877-770-9274 or jmorgan@trsa.org.



Clockwise, from top (l/r) Jeff Lebedin, AquaRecycle; Linencraft executives Muhammad Tariq, Jan Bijsterbosch and Victor Bastian; Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid al Maktoum, a constitutional monarch and leader of Dubai; one of Linencraft's 54 route vehicles; a prayer room for Linencraft plant staff.