

Softrol Celebrates 25 Years of Automation

Acworth, GA-based company plans to continue advancing laundry operations through new technologies

By Jason Risley

Innovation—in today’s fast-paced world it’s vital to keep pace with ever-evolving technologies. The same is true in the textile services business—laundry operators need to stay on the cutting edge to avoid falling behind in productivity and profitability.

Softrol Systems Inc., Acworth, GA, has made its mark through manufacturing and supplying products to help companies remain competitive in the marketplace. As Softrol celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, the company remains focused on continuing to create innovative products that will increase productivity across each area of the plant, from soil sort to wash aisle and on to the loading dock. With this goal in mind, Softrol plans to honor its anniversary with several events this year, while at the same time pushing forward its research and development (R&D) and manufacturing efforts.

“We’re planning multiple events throughout 2012—both here in Georgia as well as most likely at some of the industry events,” says Timothy Grandy, Softrol’s vice president of sales and marketing. “We’ll have awards and receptions. The key part of it—besides the events—is we’re going to continue to develop and innovate new products going forward.”

Robert Benjamin, Softrol’s vice president of finance and administration, agrees with Grandy’s sentiments. “In addition to reminding people that we’ve been around for 25 years, we want

to also make sure they understand the breadth of the solutions that we’re supplying to the laundry industry,” Benjamin says. “We’ve come a long way from doing washer and dryer controls to virtually being able to automate an entire plant.”

TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

Throughout its quarter century in business, Softrol has seen a number of technological advances that have furthered the industry. Textile services companies have come a long way from employing manual processes in their plants such as scooping powder into washers to today’s automated solutions that include electronic parts that control washers’ and dryers’ energy usage, water and chemical consumption and cleaning.

“Since our incorporation in 1987, the textile services industry has constantly been adopting production technology that uses higher degrees of automation and information for more efficient operation,” Softrol CEO Chad Keith says. “Two examples of that are complete, hands-off washroom automation and real-time production information, where management, as well as floor operators, receive information about their productivity. This information allows for better management of the overall production facility. Business intelligence is really what we’re focusing on because the result is better plant management.”

Brent Keith, Softrol’s president and Chad’s brother, adds that, “Productivity enhancements have



In addition to executive offices, Softrol Systems Inc.'s Acworth, GA, headquarters includes a manufacturing area.

driven this industry for 25 continuous years now, since we've been involved in it. It's really been a revolutionized industry—maybe they were late comers, but they've been doing a lot of catch up.”

UPPING OUTPUT

The company has a complete line of products for laundry operators to boost plant productivity. These products include chemical, rail, management, sortation and control systems.

“We cover an entire laundry from soil dock to shipping dock,” Grandy says as we tour the company's five-year old, 40,000-square-foot headquarters, which houses corporate offices as well as a manufacturing floor and engineering area for creating and testing products. “All of our systems can be integrated and talk on one platform. Everything we do increases the

productivity of a plant—the ability to integrate that information forward and backwards to help provide an entire scenario of the plant, shows what we do to improve productivity and all the places we can go to improve productivity in the future.”

One of the company's products, the Pulsenet Production System, or PPS, is designed to manage the production floor and give information to production employees and plant managers using a combination of hardware, software and network components. Production staff receive consistent feedback on their efficiency with either numerical, or visual (red and green lights), cues.

“Once you empower the employee with the information, most employees will act accordingly,” Chad Keith says. “The nice part about it is that since the information is being fed electronically,

it's totally objective and has no human element to it.”

In addition to collecting information about labor productivity, Pulsenet also gathers data about machine utilization, including usage, downtime and maintenance, and gives operators the real-time status of the textiles by account, type and customer. Daily production requirements recently were added to this system. For example, these requirements allow an operator to input the number of sheets that need to be ironed in a day, and as each sheet is ironed it counts against that number to let staff know where production needs to be to reach the goal.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

In addition to rolling out new products, many of these systems continue to receive full support years after they're manufactured. The company

offers 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week support for its customers.

“The product support is very important to us as far as why our technologies are successful,” Brent says. “We’ve always prided ourselves on supporting the products, stocking the spare parts, getting them out as quickly as possible to the customer and giving them someone to talk to on the other end of the phone when they need to troubleshoot their product.”

Chad adds that, “We don’t ‘obsolete’ many products because the customers make an investment in what we supply, and we feel like we have a responsibility to keep them supported for many, many years. The product is only as good as it saves you money and performs for you—that’s your bottom line as a customer. So, it’s important that the customer always sees our products as continuing to save them money and increasing their production efficiency. If it’s down, it’s not doing anything.”

Brent adds that, “This includes updates. We’ve been in laundries recently, updating machines to be able to use our newest technologies. That helps

someone’s investment in our product because it can be enhanced and updated as their needs grow and as our R&D efforts are extended.”

EYEING THE FUTURE

While the company continues to support its existing products, Softrol also has introduced a number of new items, including a chemical system for mid-market laundries; UtiliPulse, which monitors utilities and can be used in a plant either as a standalone product or integrated with other Softrol systems; as well as a round rail system for both clean and soiled textile goods. Softrol also recently introduced its VisiPulse system to the industry, allowing operators to get up-to-the-minute information on plant productivity.

“We’ve come up with many real-time Web-based interactive programs to allow plants to increase their productivity and performance,” Grandy says. “We’ve brought that through our productivity systems, chemical systems and rail systems, and really provide a platform to have data information for an entire plant.”

As for the future, Chad says, “We see more cross-platform automation, information and integration. Even though that’s Softrol’s current mission, I think it applies to the industry at large. We’re going to be able to supply solutions all the way from the soil receiving dock to the clean shipping dock, and our goal is to make sure that the customers see that integration all along the way. Continued integration is going to be a mantra. Reduced islands of information and increased business intelligence.”

Since its beginnings, Softrol has adapted to technological advances to create products that will further productivity for laundry operators. As technology continues to improve and further advances are made, this flexibility will be an asset and will allow the company to continue to provide cutting-edge products to further help textile services businesses increase productivity and reduce costs. **TS**

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Softrol's executive team:
(l/r) Chad Keith, Robert Benjamin, Timothy Grandy and Brent Keith.



A Softrol employee works on assembling electronic components in the plant.