



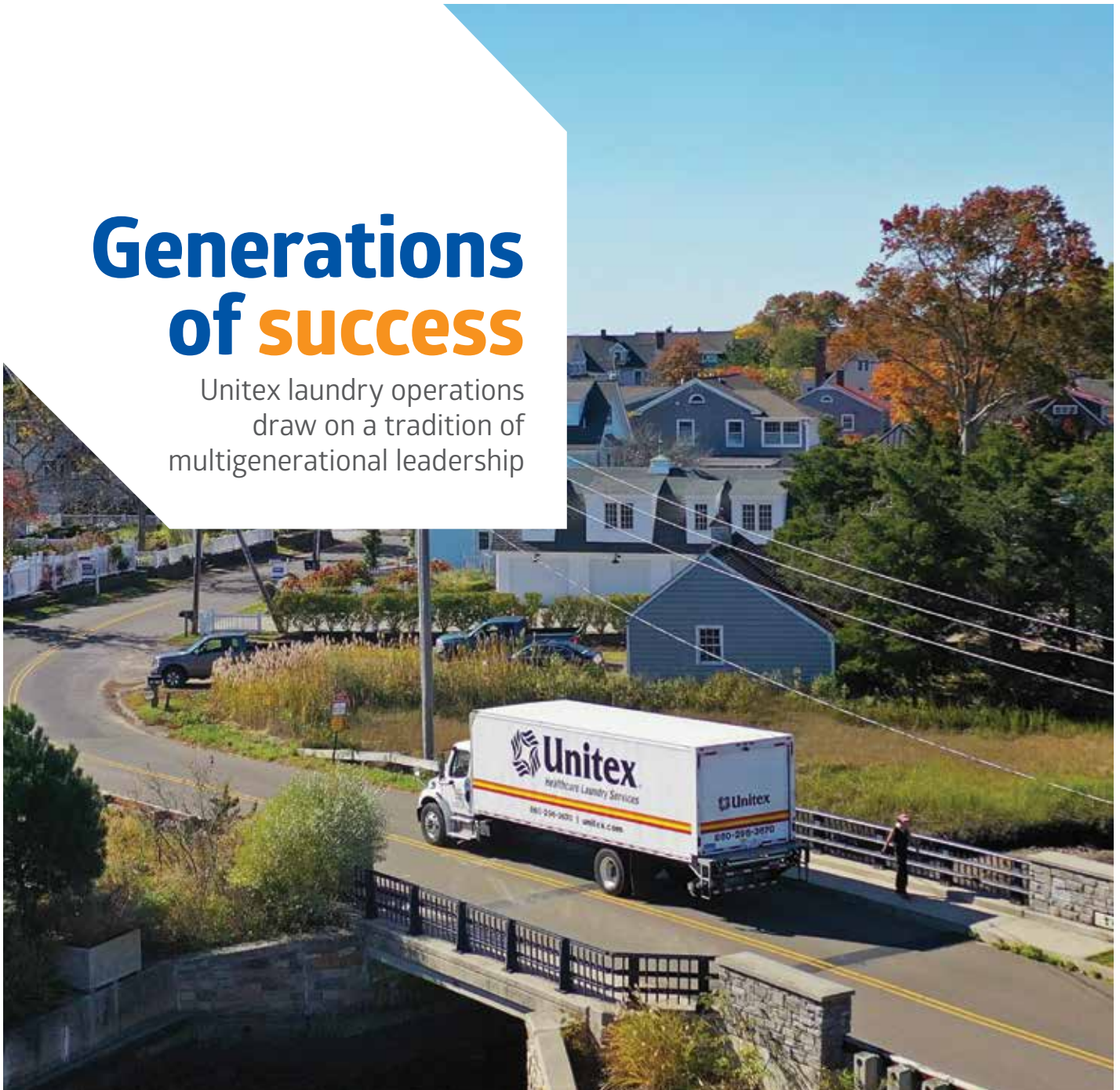
THREADS

Innovation for healthcare textiles & EVS

2020: ISSUE 11

Generations of success

Unitex laundry operations
draw on a tradition of
multigenerational leadership



Designing with
behavioral health
in mind

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Generations of success

Unitex laundry operations draw on a tradition of multigenerational leadership

How did a horse-and-wagon linen supply in Lower Manhattan, New York, grow to become the largest family-owned healthcare service provider in the country? By keeping an eye on both the past *and* the future as each generation took the helm, says Unitex president David Potack.

“We understand that the business came before us and that we should treat it with the utmost respect,” says Potack. “Our corporate culture has always been about hard work, transparency and aggressively improving how we run our operations. All of this is done for the safety of our team members and the benefit of our customers.” Working alongside David these days are his father, chairman Michael Potack, and his brother Robert Potack, who serves as chief executive officer. Another brother, Dr. Jon Potack, is a gastroenterologist and full equity partner in the family company.

Since 1922, four generations of the Potack family have shepherded the growth of Unitex in the medical uniform and linen rental industry. Today, Unitex processes a staggering 295 million pounds of healthcare laundry annually. Facilities are strategically located throughout the Northeast, and the company operates 365 days a year to ensure that more than 6,000 clients

receive the lab coats, scrubs, linens and specialty apparel they need to provide comfort and care to patients.

With a 12th processing plant opening later this year and a 13th scheduled to open in 2021, the family continues to reinvest significant capital into automation and productivity. When both new facilities are fully staffed and operational, the total Unitex employee count is projected to reach 2,000.

As a multigenerational family-owned business, how has Unitex been uniquely positioned to impact the healthcare laundry industry, and how is past success informing the company’s vision for the future? David Potack shared with us his most important guiding principles for building strong leadership.

Focus on agility

Potack says Unitex has consistently invested in innovation that anticipates evolving industry needs and tailors processing facilities to support a wide range of clients, including large acute care medical centers, ambulatory and surgical centers, and residential care facilities.

“One of the biggest benefits of being a closely held family business is that we can invest significant capital in both greenfield



SHARING THE EXPERIENCE

Unitex president David Potack still remembers his childhood trips to work with his parents. “At first you are overwhelmed by the scale of it,” he says. “I think you don’t have an appreciation until you stand in the middle of a plant.”

His reaction was not dissimilar to that of the many guests who tour the Unitek facilities each year. “There is a sort of amazement at all that is going on. Our customers are interested to see the processes in person, and we are happy to share how we operate,” he adds.

In addition to running day-to-day operations, the Potack family has worked for the betterment of their industry, opening their facilities to tours by more than 1,400 healthcare laundry professionals as well as numerous hospital infection control managers. Unitek chairman Michael Potack served as past chairman, treasurer and director of the Textile Rental Services Association (TRSA), and he was awarded the organization’s Operator Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014.

The company also strives to pay forward its good fortune. “We are proud of our legacy as a local company and an advocate for our surrounding communities,” says David Potack. “We try to lead by example through our involvement in a variety of organizations and not-for-profit boards.”

Employee feedback often drives engagement as well. Team members are encouraged to share organizations or initiatives they are passionate about. From neighborhood cleanups and Earth Day activities to concerts for retirement home residents, Unitek offers financial, material and resource support to benefit a variety of community stakeholders each year.



From left: Unitek CEO Robert Potack, president David Potack, and chairman Michael Potack.

sites and upgrades to current processing plants, with the understanding that there is not necessarily an immediate return,” says Potack. “We take steps that are in the best interest of our company in the long-term, rather than having to answer to short-term goals. This long-term reinvestment in our business also helps us expand the offerings to our customers.”

Decades ago, Unitek began to build specialized plants focused on single end markets, including bulk processing,



Unitex milestones

1922: Max Potack takes over his two uncles' coat and apron supply business, renaming it A&P Coat, Apron and Linen Supply.

1947: The company moves from Brooklyn, New York, to the Bronx and adds laundry service.

1963: Max's son, Bernard Potack, takes over the family business. The company now processes linen for hospitality, hospital and long-term care clients and expands the corporate name to include Unitex Textile Rental Services.

1966: Recent college graduate Michael Potack assumes operating responsibilities after his father, Bernard, suffers a heart attack.

1972: With the Bronx facility at capacity, Unitex purchases a location in Monroe, New York, to service acute care clients as well as the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

1974: The company buys a Middletown, New York, facility with 100 percent focus on healthcare.

1976: Michael becomes sole owner of the company.

1995: A fourth generation joins the family business as David Potack, one of Michael's three sons, is named general manager of the uniform and hospitality/ambulatory facility in Mount Vernon, New York. Unitex immediately moves the facility's focus from hospitality to healthcare accounts.

2001: Michael's son Robert Potack joins the company as plant supervisor in the Bronx processing facility, later becoming operations manager.

2011: Unitex opens its 10th facility in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Processing more than 57 million pounds of healthcare laundry annually, the 60,000-square-foot plant is designed to use the least amount of water, chemicals and energy per pound while recycling every consumable.

2017: David becomes president of Unitex. Robert Potack is named CEO.

2020: Unitex continues to expand operations, with two new facilities under development in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The state-of-the-art processing plants will provide closer proximity, increased throughput and further specialization for customers throughout the Northeast.

uniforms and specialty services. "We view ourselves as a universal provider and have been able to identify and build business units around subsets within the healthcare textile market," says Potack. "Specialty textiles require some extra attention, but they are vital to our clients' success." That focus has enabled Unitex to tailor facilities and delivery routes that accommodate both large-scale and small niche markets.

Nurture employee partnerships

Respect in the workplace is paramount. "We're incredibly fortunate to have team members in every aspect of our organization with 10, 15, even 25 years of experience – people we worked with when we were growing up who are still with us today," says Potack. "We want to make sure people understand that we appreciate them. Our employees are the backbone of how we get things done every day."

Opportunities for training and promotion, events that drive engagement and recognition, and corporate cultures that encourage employee input combine to foster a sense of esprit de corps in the workplace.

Always add value

As healthcare professionals increasingly face demands on their time and resources, dependable service providers stand out from the pack.

"If we can offer fabrics that are more durable, that may dry faster or wear better over time, those are benefits we can pass on to our customers."

David Potack

“We set out each day to do the best job we can for people,” says Potack. “We have made it a critical focus to stay ahead of healthcare trends in order to offer consistent, reliable service to our customers.”

For example, Potack notes the increased emphasis on infection prevention and compliance. “More and more, customers need to be comfortable with how textiles are processed,” he says. Take advantage of opportunities to offer onsite training to hospital staff on topics including proper handling of soiled textiles, linen loss and inventory management through linen awareness days or other events.

Given ongoing challenges with infectious outbreaks, natural disasters and extreme weather conditions, demonstrating emergency preparedness capabilities to clients is increasingly vital. “We’ve been able to help customers through challenging times, and we are steadfast in our commitment to offering absolute reliability,” says Potack. In addition to having capacity to expand to second and third shifts should the need arise, Unitex has a mobile generator that can reach any of its facilities within two hours to run operations at full capacity.

Safeguard the environment

“Sustainability is inherent to the reusable textile industry and the products we promote,” says Potack. “It is certainly reflected in how our company has reinvested in newer, more efficient equipment to reduce water, electric and natural gas usage. We are consuming far fewer resources in our processes compared to even 10 years ago.”

That green mindset informs decisions throughout plant operations, including adopting 100 percent organic cleaning chemicals,



Unitex processes 295 million pounds of healthcare laundry annually.

implementing technology to improve fleet route optimization and fuel conservation, and highlighting environmental best practices during informational plant tours. Additionally, Unitex recycles more than 1.5 million pounds of plastic annually.

Follow textile trends

Today’s range of textile choices offer antimicrobial properties, withstand more wash cycles, require reduced drying time and operational costs, and raise the bar in terms of employee and patient comfort.

“The evolution of textiles is something we pay close attention to,” says Potack. “If we can offer fabrics that are more durable, that may dry faster or wear better over time, those are benefits we can pass on to our customers.” Additionally, as more people in healthcare are wearing some type of uniform, demand is increasing for garments that deliver enhanced comfort and fit. Leveraging partnerships with textile vendors

provides laundries with a platform to bring additional value to their hospital and ambulatory clients.

Never take it for granted

When they were raising their boys, Michael Potack and his wife, Randi, made sure the brothers developed a strong work ethic. The three youngsters did everything from laboring in the processing facilities to driving delivery trucks, and they spent school breaks and summer vacations learning about every task firsthand.

“No company is easy to run, but we view ourselves as incredibly fortunate,” says David Potack. “For any family business, I would tell future generations to put forth the effort to truly understand what it has taken to get to this point and where the challenges and opportunities lie moving forward. At the end of the day, it comes down to reliability of service and execution if companies hope to enjoy lasting partnerships with their customers.” ■