



A nine-foot bronze statue of John Wayne greets visitors to the eponymously named airport that's located near Prudential Overall Supply's corporate headquarters in Irvine, CA. Inset is POS President Tom Watts. (l/r) Vista, CA, plant GM Scott Chafin, Dir. of Production Martin Pharis, and POS VP Sales and Marketing Jerry Martin.

## Prudential— A Passion for Excellence!

*An industrial company seeks growth by upgrading systems and supporting the people who operate them*

By Jack Morgan

**J**ohn D. Clark, an Iowa native who founded Prudential Overall Supply in Los Angeles in 1932, had a straightforward outlook on business: "If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing right." That was an adage of Clark's that his son Dan recalled during a 1991 memorial service for his father. Prudential, commonly known as "POS," is now in its second generation of family ownership. The company has grown from a one-man operation laundering industrial uniforms (mainly by hand), to today's large company that serves thousands of customers with industrial uniforms and related textile services in Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas and Washington; plus Cleanroom services throughout North America, Puerto Rico and Malaysia.

*Textile Rental* recently paid a visit to Prudential. We toured the company's Vista, CA, uniform plant and stopped by the corporate office in Irvine, CA, for an interview with Tom Watts, POS' sec-

ond nonfamily president. A veteran POS manager, Watts rose through the ranks over 34 years from customer service representative (CSR) through various route, plant and corporate managerial posts until he was named to the top executive job in 1999. Dan Clark, the former president of POS, still serves as chairman of the board.

After seeing the Vista plant, I came away convinced that the spirit of enterprise that the founder brought to his company is thriving amid the focus and commitment that today's POS applies both to customers and staff. A job worth doing is indeed worth doing right. And that includes not only taking care of customers with outstanding service and quality products, but also doing your utmost to ensure safe working conditions for employees. It also means embracing environmental stewardship by dealing with laundry wastes in a 'prudential' fashion, if you will. POS does all these things and more. And although the recession has exacerbated a



A POS delivery vehicle is parked outside the plant.



Carts loaded with bundles of clean shop and bar towels await movement to route vehicles in the loading area outside the plant.



Restaurant service, particularly at casual outlets that use cloth napkins but not tabletops, is a growing business for POS, amid the decline of some manufacturing companies in California. Here we see carts loaded with aprons.



A view of POS' corporate headquarters in Irvine, CA

long-term decline in manufacturing that was a mainstay of this company's customer base, POS' people are adapting to today's business conditions with innovation and a 'can-do' attitude.

### Color-coded slings

Built in 1990, POS' 42,560-square-foot plant in Vista processes mainly industrial uniforms (50% of throughput), mats/mops (20%), towels (20% [half shop towels; half bar mops]), restaurant linens and aprons (10%). Restaurant items are a small but growing part of the plant's production. Incoming soiled goods from trucks are placed on a cart dumper that drops the goods onto a conveyor ramp that moves them to employees for sorting into color-coded slings. While the wash aisle is largely automated, the slings give everyone a visual confirmation of what's moving through the plant at any given time. Pants go in blue slings; shirts in orange; mats in white and linen in green. The plant processes about 75,000-80,000

lbs. per week.

Jerry Martin, Prudential's vice president of sales and marketing and a co-leader of the tour, notes that the conveyor is in an area where POS is working on an upgrade with Jensen. "Anytime we can do something that makes an improvement for the staff, then we're going to make that investment," Martin says. Once employees sort the goods into their respective slings, a Speed Check overhead rail system takes them to the wash aisle. The workhorses in this plant are six L-Tron Washers by American/Jensen: two of them are 450 lbs., and three are 800 lb. machines, plus one 125 lb. pony washer. Goods move via a Speed Check shuttle system from the washers to one of two 800 lb. Consolidated Laundry Machinery Dryers or one 400 lb. American Dryer. The system is equipped with auto-shutoff systems for safety. The progress of goods through various machines is monitored on a large overhead computer screen provided by Dober's Ultrax system. The Vista plant's

## Plant



A sign outside the plant underscores for POS employees the importance of customer service.



A wash aisle operator prepares to remove finished goods from a dryer



Signs posted in the plant indicate which goods go in what color of slings. The color-coding system helps everyone know instantly what types of goods are in a given sling as it moves through the plant.



Clean shop towels await delivery. They too are color coded. The blue towels are for print shops; the orange ones are for mechanics.

Director of Production Martin Pharis says the plant served as a pilot facility for Dober's Spindle system, which provides operators with an elaborate electronic 'dashboard' to see how goods are moving through the plant, loads sizes, wash times and more. "We're going to upgrade everything to Spindle this year," Pharis says.

In the Ultrax system, a yellow bar on the screen indicates a mechanical problem, such as washers not processing goods quickly enough. A red bar means the operator isn't moving goods through the system in a timely fashion. Orange and blue-colored bars mean the equipment and staff are meeting efficiency standards. The screen helps because it lets operators, as well as managers, know exactly where things stand. "Now the employee can watch his own performance," says Pharis, who notes that the system has fueled a labor savings of up to 50%. "If the orange bar matches the blue, he's right where he needs to be."

Managers can access the screen to track washroom activity from

their offices, or when they're on the road. "The screen that's in the plant is also available in the supervisor's office," Pharis says. "We have a program that we can go into to get this information off-site as well." The plant employs 33 production staff out of a total of 97 employees.

### Mats lie flat

Moving to the finishing side, Martin points out a POS innovation: mats are stored lying flat rather than rolled. "It's ultimately a better product for customers," says Martin. "There's no bundling as with rolled up mats. It works better with the configuration of how we load our trucks."

Now serving 2,500 customers, the Vista plant's 16 routes have gotten larger as the business has grown. The expansion has underscored the need for route optimization, as well as larger trucks. The Vista plant currently runs three 22-foot trucks and 13 18-foot



This Ultrax overhead screen from Dober tells POS/Vista employees in the wash aisle how they're progressing in terms of the productivity of employees and machines. The plant is expected to upgrade its monitoring program this year to Dober's Spindle system.



A CLM dryer in the wash aisle

DRYING SCHEDULE	
450 WASHER	
CLASSIFICATION	FORMULA
SHIRT	1
PRINTS/EN-POINT DC	2
COTTON PRINTS/COVERALLS	3
CHADS/SHIRTS/COVING/SPONGE/LAUNDRY BAGS	4
COTTON SHIRTS	5
HE-DRY (MATS)/EXECUTIVE SHIRTS	6
HEAT/HEAT/HEATY/TOWEL	7
SNOW TOWELS	8
WET MOPS/TENDER COVERING/TOWEL	9

  

800 WASHER	
CLASSIFICATION	FORMULA
SHIRT	11
PRINTS/EN-POINT DC	12
COTTON PRINTS/COVERALLS	13
CHADS/SHIRTS/COVING/SPONGE/LAUNDRY BAGS	14
COTTON SHIRTS	15
HE-DRY (MATS)/EXECUTIVE SHIRTS	16
HEAT/HEAT/HEATY/TOWEL	17
SNOW TOWELS	18
WET MOPS/TENDER COVERING/TOWEL	19



A sign on a wall in the plant advises employees on drying schedules for various goods coming from 450 and 800 lb. washers. An automatic lift raises up slings of soiled goods to the overhead rail system for movement to the wash aisle.



POS preaches safety awareness to its employees as a critical part of their jobs. Here we see signs from different departments showing how many days they've gone without an accident.

trucks. POS is seeking to grow its market share in restaurants, particularly among casual eateries that provide patrons with cloth napkins, but not tabletops. "This plant's starting to get into napkins," Martin says. "We just purchased a Chicago ironer. Every one of our plants has access to an ironer. We do not do tabletops as a rule. About 10% of our business now is in restaurant-related work."

Another important product in the POS line is microfiber cleaning cloths from Medline Industries Inc. These are popular with healthcare outlets and casinos due to their superior cleaning ability with limited use of chemicals. The microfiber requires its own wash formula, and these items are laundered separately from cotton or blended towels, Pharis says. "Once you get the formula down, it's pretty steady," he says. You do have to segregate them."

### Water conservation/management

Prudential's focus on providing customers with outstanding products and services extends to its outlook on environmental stewardship. Prudential is an active member of **LaundryESP®**, and Martin also is involved on the marketing side with TRSA's 'Clean Green' initiative, which seeks to educate customers and prospects on the environmental advantages of reusables vs. disposables (see related article in April's *Textile Rental*, pg. 48).

As we walk through the plant, Martin Pharis and General Manager Scott Chafin point out the investment POS has made in reducing the size of the company's environmental footprint. "We reuse water—whether it's hot or cold," Pharis says, adding that, "Anytime before we discharge, it's run through the wastewater process." POS' treatment process includes an equalizing tank for separating out oils and grease. There's also a three-stage flocculation process for removing soil and adjusting pH before water is

# Tom Watts—An ‘Up-Through-the-Ranks’ President

*Prudential chief reflects on growth efforts, the industrial sector, succession planning and more*



*POS President Tom Watts stands outside company headquarters in Irvine, CA. He is the company's second nonfamily chief executive*

**Editor's note:** During a recent tour of Prudential Overall Supply's Vista, CA, uniform plant, we swung by POS' headquarters in Irvine to interview company President Tom Watts on issues facing his company, the industrial sector of textile services and beyond. Watts began as a POS route rep in 1975 and worked his way up through various route and plant executive jobs before he was named president in 1999.

## **How are you managing amid the economic downturn?**

We see a lot of shrinkage in our customer base. Unemployment, especially in what we call the Inland Empire part of California, it's up over 10%. Our focus is two-fold: One, having our route people offset the shrinkage within those accounts with other products and services. But also, we really focus on the new-growth sales. We're committed, even in a down economy, to grow.

## **What are you doing to sign up 'no-programmers,' (i.e. companies with no uniform program)?**

I think that the potential there is huge. I don't remember the exact number, but maybe 40% of our current new customers are (former) no-programmers. Personally, I think we have to market directly to them by saying, 'Let us take care of that aspect of your equipment. We'll supply the garments. We'll pick them up and launder them. Your employees will look consistent, they'll look neat and clean and organized. You have the additional marketing aspect from the logos.

## **Has the economic downturn affected your focus on investing in plant efficiency?**

No. We realize that we have to gain more efficiency because we've got shrinking revenues in some locations. Efficiencies in processing help us control costs, so I don't think it's softened our approach at all. We are still committed to investing in our plants.

## **How important is environmentalism to POS, to the industry and to the United States?**

The national focus on environmental stewardship has come and gone numerous times. I remember the first Earth Day in the early 1970s. But I think it's here to stay this time. I think the United States is finally starting to get the message that we don't have infinite resources. We do have to be environmentally conscious and our particular service is perhaps the way to practice environmental stewardship. In effect, our industry has always been "green," we just never spent much time marketing the fact.

## **What's POS doing to keep employees safe?**

We have always practiced safety in our facilities, but various programs have been driven from the top of the organization down and have not been very sustainable. We recently started working with the Milliken Company and their consultant arm, Milliken Performance Solutions. We have contracted with them for a few of our plants to work toward VPP (Voluntary Protection Program) certification with OSHA, which is an actual partnership with

OSHA. Milliken is helping us along our safety journey so that we can improve our incident rates and continue to have safety as the focus.

### **Is there a bright future for the industrial business, particularly independents?**

Yes, I really do believe there is. If we're selling 40% of no-programmers that's a huge untapped market that we don't have now. I think it's even bigger than that. But we just have to refocus our thoughts. Sometimes we get mired down and think 'They can have whatever they want so long as it's blue and grey.' But with guys like Jerry (Martin, POS' vice president of sales and marketing) convincing guys like me to make changes, there's a very bright future. And I think there's a lot of room for independents. They fill a niche market. Smaller companies like to do business with people like them. They've got excellent customer relationships.

### **As POS' second nonfamily president, what's your take on succession planning?**

I think that future generations need to know how the business runs. And what it takes to bring the revenue in. But the newer generations are more technologically advanced. I don't know that they're as interested in the nuts and bolts. And I would suggest to any enterprise that's considering the next generation not to force the children to do every job that they had to do, such as count towels and press pants. Because I think that with today's generation, they just lose interest too quickly. That's not what they're about. I think they have to know how the business is run. But they don't have to know how to do every job.

### **How did you get into the business?**

My dad was on a (POS) route years ago. And I came from a different industry and was basically not sure where I wanted to go, or what I wanted to do. And he said, 'Why don't you try this, they have a route open.' It wasn't something I felt I'd be interested in. But it was outside and away from a desk. So I said, 'OK, I'll try it,' and so I started on a route (in his mid-20s). I enjoyed it. I liked being away from 'all the bosses' all day on my own on a route. But I liked working with people too, so I guess supervision came naturally as far as something I'm interested in. I've worked in many different positions and the company's given me a lot of excellent opportunities.

### **As POS' president, what matters most to you?**

I just want to make sure we're all about our people and our customers. I'm less interested in me and my story as I am in what our people do. It takes 1,500 people to run this company. That's just our culture.

—Jack Morgan

**"Our gas costs are out of control. We need to become more energy efficient. Our customers will not allow us to charge them more. Too many sur-charges. Profits are down. Too much down time. We need more production out of our machines. I need peace of mind."**

The ever-energy efficient dryer



See us in Booth #1739

The name you can trust. **Consolidated Dryers**



1151 East 29th St. Los Angeles, CA 90011 Tel: 323.232.2417 www.CLMCO.com

## Plant



POS/Vista deposits dry sludge from its wastewater treatment system into the metal container shown above. The bin is taken to a landfill and emptied about three times a year.



A stack economizer in the plant



Chemical storage equipment near the wastewater-treatment area is marked with warnings to employees about confined-space restrictions.



Bundles of blue and white towels await delivery to customers.

discharged to the sewer. Special equipment is used to skim sludge off the top of the water. It ends up as a dry sludge that's deposited in a large red steel box located outside the plant. "It's manifested and taken to a landfill," Pharis says of the sludge. "We are running this container out to a landfill about three times a year. It's a testament to the system. It only takes out what we can't reuse." One-third of all water in the plant is reused and 100% of all clean rinse water is reused, he adds. Other water/energy conservation equipment at the Vista plant includes a shaker screen for removing lint and a heat reclaimer, both from Thermal Engineering of Arizona (TEA). The heat reclaimer enables POS to recover 40% of the heat from water used in the wash aisle. Martin says POS applies similar systems for environmental conservation at all its plants. A full-time staff person, Lee Terry, director of environmental affairs and safety, oversees POS' environmental programs and compliance from the company's Irvine headquarters. Other equipment in this area of the

Vista plant includes a 150 HP Parker water-tube boiler, a Ludell hot-water system and a TEA stack economizer.

POS President Tom Watts weighed in on the environmental issue as well, noting that, "We want to make sure that we stay involved in the **LaundryESP** (TRSA/UTSA's environmental-improvement program for the industry). I think from a macro view we have to continue to stay active in supporting a clean environment." (See related interview story on pg. 60.)

### Fleet/route management

As with the company's approach to environmental conservation, POS' Vista staff also take pride in their in-house vehicle maintenance shop that keeps the company's route-delivery trucks running smoothly and efficiently. The shop is equipped to do major and minor repairs, from rehabbing engines and suspensions to routine maintenance. "We are able to control our costs," Pharis says, not-



*A view of water softening equipment*



*An employee places work pants on hangers for movement to the overhead rail system that takes them to the tunnel finisher.*



*POS stores clean mats flat rather than rolling them. This makes for more efficient movement onto the trucks with less labor.*



*A small number of logomats are stored in bins like the one above to make sure they are delivered to the right customers.*

ing that keeping vehicle maintenance in-house increases POS' flexibility in terms of making emergency repairs and ensuring maximum fuel efficiency and performance with well-tuned engines.

Martin adds that POS has placed GPS monitoring equipment in each truck. This helps ensure that drivers operate their vehicles safely and efficiently. "It keeps people honest as far as the time spent in the account," he says. "It shows starting times and excessive idling. It also shows speeding." The system reveals the "outliers" among route reps, he adds. In other words, anyone who's tempted to abuse the freedom a route offers is effectively discouraged from doing so. It also allows for routing efficiency gains to save gas, time and money.

Prudential is now in the process of upgrading its route-accounting system with help from ABS Laundry Business Solutions, Martin says. Some plants, such as POS Tucson, are already auto-

mated, and barcodes are used to track all uniform items. "The endgame for Prudential is to barcode everything," he adds, noting that all CSRs will get handhelds this year to help them keep track of customer orders.

The upgrades will enhance POS' already prompt turnaround time on customer deliveries. "It comes in a Monday; it goes out on a Friday," Pharis says of the plant's regular rotation of uniforms, towels, mats, etc. "We're only sitting on two weeks of inventory. It's pumping through this place." With mats, which are supplied by Milliken & Co., POS' Vista plant has inserted RF chips to help track its inventory by route, delivery day and customer. "They scan them right out of the washer," says Martin. "Then it goes to the color-coded cart for that day, then it's put on the pallets."

#### Market mix: old and new

Continuing the plant tour, we pass large bins of green dust mops



## Plant



POS does a strong restroom-supply business. Above, shrink-wrapped boxes of paper products await delivery to customers.



A POS/Vista employee moves paper goods from the loading dock with a forklift.



Bins loaded with finished goods await delivery outside the loading dock.



An ironer from Chicago Dryer Co. is used to process a growing number of napkins that are processed in the plant.

and color-coded shop towels (blue for printers, green for industrial and orange for mechanics). A Dynaric Inc. strapping machine bundles the finished towels prior to delivery. We also see signs of POS' effort to expand its service to restaurants. This includes the aforementioned small-piece ironer from Chicago Dryer and stacks of aprons from American Dawn Inc. (ADI).

Pressing executive shirts is a more traditional POS service. We see a row of pressing equipment, including one Ajax machine and several American Laundry Machinery presses for executive-wear garments. The plant operates four shirt presses and one coat press. On a mezzanine level, the plant also operates a Colmac tunnel finisher that receives poly-blended pants from the overhead rail system. Prudential continues to press all industrial shirts with the traditional form press method.

### Efficient and safe

POS' focus on continuous improvement at its Vista plant extends

not only to machinery and software, but also to protecting its most prized asset: people. Martin points out a ramp area that was built up alongside the overhead rail system to improve ergonomic conditions for employees who are hanging shirts and pants there. Looking above, he points out skylights that were installed to improve the work environment and save energy. Pharis says both the lights and ceiling fans are connected to a PLC that controls their use and shuts them down when they're not needed.

Plant and route safety is an area of prime concern to POS. The company has a full-time Safety Manager, Alex Navarro. Safety Committees comprised of route and plant staff also meet monthly to review potential problems and take action where needed. POS is working with Milliken Performance Solutions, the company's safety consulting arm, on a 20-step process of safety improvements. "Our start-up plant was Irvine," Martin says of the program. "We're now running that program out companywide." The safety



An employee places a work shirt on a shirt press. POS still presses all its work shirts; work pants are processed through a tunnel finisher.



Work shirts move on an overhead rail system through the finishing department.



The Vista plant displays a large number of banners given by the company for outstanding achievement.



A Jensen stacking/storage machine sits at the end of the ironer.

effort is focused on achieving recognition from the Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) sponsored by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The VPP program is OSHA's effort to encourage management and labor to work together to improve safety management and eliminate workplace hazards. Recognition as a VPP company means OSHA acknowledges that the company has made an exemplary effort at ensuring safety. It's an ambitious program, but one that fits squarely with POS' priorities. POS President Tom Watts added that this program is designed to put POS in the vanguard of companies that preach safety. "The existing safety teams or groups that we've had all along were more reactive," Watts says. "You know, analyze an accident. Look at what happened and, say, 'Let's not do it again.' This is more proactive. We want to head off any potential injuries. Identify areas where someone could get hurt. Identify, train, educate and then make sure that we don't have any injuries."

Considering POS' approach to safety management, improving efficiency, environmental conservation, providing customers with outstanding products and services, and much else, it's clear that this company has a passion for excellence. Our tour of the Vista facility reflected well on it's founder's adage that if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing it right. In fact, the Vista plant is turning POS founder John D. Clark's vision into a reality on a daily basis. **TR**



Jack Morgan is editor of Textile Rental. Contact him at 877/770-9274 or [jmorgan@trsa.org](mailto:jmorgan@trsa.org).