



STILL GROWING STRONG—

GUNDERSON MARKS 70 YEARS OF SERVICE

Sector diversity comes naturally to this Wisconsin launderer that operates in an area with ‘more cows than people’

By Jack Morgan

Lety Serrano, a seven-year employee who worked her way up from towel folder to plant manager, epitomizes the spirit of service that has fueled Gunderson Uniform and Linen Rental’s growth in 70 years as a family-owned independent in Menasha, WI.

“We talk about culture with Lety,” says President Doug Gunderson, speaking of Serrano. “I think she’s a huge part in helping us understand really what the culture is and what the wants and needs of our employees are.” He describes how Serrano reached out to Doug’s sister, co-owner Sara Gunderson, regarding issues that staff members were having in finding housing in the “Fox Valley,” of northeast Wisconsin. That

area includes Menasha and the nearby towns of Appleton and Neenah, WI.

Once alerted to the situation, Sara began calling social service agencies and others to find assistance for any employees who needed help. “Through Lety, I had heard that there were a couple of people in the plant who could not find housing,” Sara says. “They were struggling, and they were working long hours. So I sat in my office and I made phone calls for a couple of hours and looked for places. I was struggling trying to help. They were looking for apartments. So I reached out to a resource that I’ve had communications with and said, ‘Do you know anybody? Can you help me?’” After working the phones a few days, Sara was able to line up some organizations that could work with employees with a variety of issues. Soon after, a meeting, dubbed the “Resource Fair” was held to help match employees with a range of community organizations that could assist them. “That’s where that whole thing blossomed, and that’s how the Resource Fair came about,” Sara says.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Sara and Doug’s emphasis on responding to staff needs extends to Gunderson’s approach to customers as well. While Sales and Service Vice President Sam Feldt works to bring in new business, the company relies on its account-management team to make sure that the wants and needs of its clients are consistently met. Their goal is to boost retention, while also building revenue by selling additional services and products. When Feldt goes out to sell, the company’s five account managers focus on strengthening ties with customers. “We’re driving our team to have that deeper relationship with the appropriate people at the customer level,” says Doug. These account managers conduct in-person visits to each customer at least once per quarter. Very large accounts or customers needing assistance may receive more-frequent visits, he says. The goal is to ensure customer satisfaction with Gunderson’s service, including providing them with additional services as needed. “They should be upselling,” Sara says, as well as getting contract renewals. “For instance, if I go into an account, I’ll look to see if they have mats.” Depending

on what the client's already using, the account manager may suggest swapping out a conventional mat for a logo mat or adding microfiber towels to replace cotton or blended towels.

Doug notes that all information gathered about clients is fed into the company's customer relationship management (CRM) software. While this is helpful, the company works, "mostly face to face, as opposed to online surveys and that kind of thing," Doug says. Longer term, Sara adds that the goal is to build a more in-depth awareness of customer needs. This approach, coupled with the recent pandemic shutdowns of restaurants and other businesses, naturally promotes a diversified approach to pursuing market sectors, Doug says.

Now that the company has fully recovered from the pandemic, other challenges remain. For example, while area paper mills are a steady source of floor-mat rentals and direct-sale supplies, these companies have resisted pitches from Gunderson staff to adopt a rental uniform program for their employees. "Other than floor mats, a lot of them don't do traditional uniform programs," says Feldt. Gunderson Uniform also must compete with all of the major national companies and other independents vying for business. In this sparsely populated area, Gunderson can't afford to specialize in one area. "Around here, we like to say we're in a state where there's more cows than people," Doug says. "So we have to broaden our product offerings."

Healthcare, including outpatient as well as acute-care textiles, is an important source of market diversification for Gunderson Uniform. In fact, healthcare is the company's largest market segment, taking roughly 45% of overall sales. Next is food and beverage (F&B) at 26%, industrial at 17% and hotels at 12%. The latter market includes summer vacation properties located mainly in Door County, WI, a peninsula north of Green Bay that juts into Lake Michigan. An important factor for both hotel and healthcare customers is the fact that Gunderson is certified to TRSA's Hygienically Clean standard for both hospitality and healthcare. As for medical facilities, Sara says that every request for proposals that the company responds to include questions about certification. "It's part of every presentation," she

BELOW: (Clockwise from top) An employee pulls flatwork items off of a folder for movement to packout; a view of the plant's chemical-injection equipment; employees feed flatwork into a feeder for movement to the ironer; an employee feeds goods into a small-piece folder; on the opening page, a view of garment-sortation equipment at the Sanford Street plant, which is a short drive from the Main Street plant in Menasha where Gunderson Uniform and Linen is based.





ABOVE: Gunderson Uniform and Linen executives Sara Gunderson, her father Gary Gunderson and brother Doug Gunderson stand outside the company's Main Street, Menasha, WI, headquarters; an exterior view of the company's nearby industrial plant on Sanford Street; Two large trucks display the company's colorful logo, plus TRSA's Hygienically Clean Healthcare and Hospitality certification logos.

says of Hygienically Clean. "I think there's value there, for sure." With hotels, the issue of hygiene took on new urgency during the pandemic. "The hotels, especially with COVID, really love knowing that we are hygienically clean and certified," Sara says. Of course, meeting the requirements for certification typically includes making modifications in the plant. That can be challenging for older properties, like Gunderson Uniform, that have built additions on over many years. Gunderson has occupied its headquarters plant at 41 Main St. since it opened—initially as commercial dry cleaner—in 1952. The now third-generation company has completed 15 additions, Doug says. We saw the Main Street facility firsthand, and a second plant that's used mainly for industrial work. That building is a few blocks away at 268 Sanford St.

IN THE PLANTS

Gunderson previously operated a plant in Oshkosh, WI, but that closed in the early 2000s, Sara says. Today, Gunderson operates the two plants noted above. Doug and Sara's brother Greg runs the company's dry-cleaning business out of a plant in Appleton. For strategic reasons, both the textile rental and dry-cleaning businesses have the same name and branding. However, they operate independently. "We did a separation between the two businesses last year," Doug says. "With that separation, dry cleaning is still Gunderson; we're still Gunderson." There's no enmity over the split, it's just a strategic business decision.

Between the Main and Sanford Street plants, Gunderson has 110,000 square feet of production space. Our tour of the Main Street plant began in the soil area. Goods arrive either in blue plastic bags (healthcare) or loose (garments and F&B or hotel flatwork). We watched as an employee opened bags and dropped soiled goods onto a belt that moved them up to a sorting area. There we saw about a half a dozen employees dropping various goods into

carts lined with slings for items, such as napkins and patient gowns. All garments and some flatwork items, such as sheets from ADI, are fitted with RFID tags. Carts filled with sorted goods are weighed and those with tags are rolled into a Positek RFID portal for tracking. Next, employees use a hoist to lift the slings onto an ETECH rail system for movement to one of two tunnel washers.

Gunderson is a proud partner with its main wash aisle and finishing machinery provider, Girbau Industrial. The U.S. branch of this Spanish company is based in nearby Oshkosh. Gary Gunderson, the father of Sara, Doug and Greg, took over the business in 1989 from his father, the late Douglas E. Gunderson. Douglas E. was the founder of the company. Gary is now retired, but he continues to chair the company's Board of Directors. He was the first laundry operator in North America to install a Girbau tunnel washer. This machine has 12, 100 lb. (45 kg.) modules. Negative air flow from the clean to the soil side of the plant ensures compliance with Hygienically Clean requirements. A few feet away from the Girbau tunnel is a Voss tunnel washer with 18, 85 lb. (38 kg.) modules. Several years ago, Kannegiesser acquired Voss, a German manufacturer. Voss parts are now available from Kannegiesser, Doug says. Laundry chemistry for the plant—as well as production-tracking technology—is provided by Gurtler Industries Inc. The wash aisle also has four front-loading pony washers from Girbau: two 250 lb. (113 kg.) and two 130 lb. (58 kg.) machines. Most of the goods here are rental items. However, the pony washers are used for smaller lots of rental or customer-owned goods, or stain rewash.

After processing in the tunnels, “cakes” of clean wet goods emerge from either of two presses and move via conveyor or a hand cart to four 200 lb. (90 kg.) Girbau dryers or five 200 lb. (90 kg.) Voss dryers. After drying, goods drop into carts fitted with slings and are moved by a clean-side rail system to the

finishing aisle. There, they'll undergo the next phase of processing.

The finishing department features a diverse lineup of equipment. We saw two Girbau three-roll ironers with Girbau feeders and one Girbau folder and a JENSEN folder/accumulator. There is also a two-roll thermal ironer from DeHooze, a Belgian manufacturer. It's fitted with a Girbau DRC feeder and a

Chicago Skyline folder from Chicago Dryer Co. In the dry-fold area, we see four Air Chicago folders and one Girbau Maxi-Folder.

During a quick stop at the boiler room, we see two boilers (one used mainly for backup) as well as a Ludell stack economizer and heat-reclamation system. Overall, the plant's wash aisle uses 1.1 gallons per lb.



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After the tour, we went with Sara, Doug and Operations Manager Andrew Leonard to the Sanford Street plant, roughly 16 blocks west of the Main Street location. This plant, dubbed “G2” (the main plant is known as “G1”) is set up mainly for uniform pressing, rather than flatwork, with conventional washer/extractors. However, there is room for growth here. As healthcare expands, Sara says she expects to shift a portion of their medical textiles to this location. “The expansion plan is to retrofit the Sanford Street location to be a linen plant as well as industrial.” The idea is to add an ironer line at G2. That, in turn, will free up more capacity for healthcare and hotel work at G1.

The two plants service 21 routes, using 21 trucks and two tractor trailers. The Gunderson Uniform market area extends roughly two hours from Menasha. This includes the Badger State capital of Madison, as well as Milwaukee, where Gunderson operates a depot. Gunderson Uniform currently services roughly 1,700 accounts, mainly with rental items. Gunderson

does a robust business with direct-sale garments and other items as well, for customers that prefer that option. The Main Street plant also has an embroidery department, which allows Gunderson to complete in-house custom designs such as logos and other graphics for its customers.

The total combined throughput for the two plants is currently 340,000 lbs. per week with a staff of 150 people (both pre- and post-COVID). With numerous product lines, multiple facilities and a service area stretching across a large portion of Wisconsin, one wonders how the Gunderson team manages to keep everyone focused on continuous improvement in quality and customer service. After the tours, we learned how a leadership consulting program has helped Gunderson fine-tune its organizational strategy.

SPIRIT OF SERVICE

In 2015, the Gunderson management team began working with an Arkansas-based consulting firm that

specializes in “cultural transformation solutions.” The program emphasized leadership development and team building. During multiple on-site and virtual sessions with the group, Gunderson managers have gained insights on their business strategy through “experiential learning.” Company executives have worked with the consultants to align the Gunderson leadership team and front-line supervisors in an effort to transform the corporate culture. This initiative has included the development of a “Compass” or mission statement to guide the company forward. Key points include:

- **VISION:** A team of 100% actively engaged people delivering world-class service
- **PURPOSE:** Create loyal and happy customers; empower/recognize our people and build a better community
- **VALUE:** Clear communications, respect, integrity, commitment and “100% responsibility”

While this strategic approach has helped fuel the company’s growth, Doug adds that he’s grateful to Gary for laying a strong foundation for the business to continue to prosper. “My father Gary did a tremendous job over many years of building up our family business,” Doug says. “We would not be here now without his skills, drive and dedication. Our challenge for the 2020s and beyond is to build on his legacy of success.”

Doug added that the strategic plan highlighted above—along with Sara’s joining the business—has helped the Gunderson team accelerate its expansion efforts.

“It’s really gained momentum the last seven or eight years since Sara got on board here,” he says. “She does a nice job with culture building and communication and engagement. Specifically, Sara leads an “Employee Experience Committee.” Her goal is to make sure

Gunderson Uniform: Serious About Safety

Gunderson Uniform & Linen Rental, Menasha, WI, takes an energetic and systematic approach to incident prevention involving its staff and customers, says co-owner and Manager Sara Gunderson.

“We take the safety of our teammates and community very seriously,” Gunderson says. “We have a dedicated HR/safety manager that oversees the program.”

The company also works with a third-party safety company that helps them conduct monthly training programs and awareness. “We also employ a third-party translator to assist in communication to our non-English-speaking employees,” Gunderson adds.

Encouraging employee input is critical to the company’s success in incident prevention. “We encourage our team members to make suggestions either in person or anonymously in our safety suggestion boxes, which are located in several locations in our facilities.” Small wonder that Gunderson Uniform’s Total Recordable Incident Rate (TRIR) and Days Away from Work, Days of Restricted Activity and Days Transferred Rate (DART) are below the industry average of 1.0.

the mission statement is more than “just words on the wall.” Sara worked in banking for several years and spent a dozen more raising a family before joining Gunderson Uniform full-time in 2015.


Sara says her communications focus—including recruitment/retention efforts—includes working to make Gunderson Uniform a “fun place to work.” Even during our brief time there, we heard plenty of joking and wisecracks. The Gunderson team takes its business seriously, but they enjoy what they’re doing. As for hiring, the company does no advertising. Instead, they rely on word-of-mouth recommendations

from friends and staff to find new people. Given the labor shortage across North America, they’re doing quite well. “We’ve been blessed,” Sara says. “We haven’t had much problem with production-employee recruiting, retention, the whole gamut. They like that it’s a family business.”

Naturally, Gunderson Uniform & Linen’s 70th anniversary party this summer was a big production. Food trucks rolled in to serve more than 250 staff and guests who gathered in a local park with a clown, raffle prizes, a dunk tank (for Doug) and more, “Yes, we were doing fun things like that,” Sara says, adding that the party had a ’70s theme,

“The people dressed up in 70s gear,” she says. “We handed out tie-dyed T-shirts.”

Whether it’s throwing a party, going the extra mile to ensure quality and compliance, or helping staff members find housing, Gunderson Uniform & Linen has thrived for 70 years on a spirit of service. From what we saw in Menasha, it looks like that approach will keep Gunderson growing strong for years to come. **TS**

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“There are unique particularities to both online and in-person training, but it ultimately depends on the commitment of the organization to continuous training, the quality of the material being conveyed and how receptive an individual is to learning in general. As Benjamin Franklin said, ‘Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.’”

Pinti of AlSCO suggests that companies can get around this problem by deploying both types of training. “There are pluses and minuses to both online and in-person training,” he says. “In-person training is certainly valuable, especially with employees that are new to the company or new to a job role. The downside of in-person training is that it can be difficult to recall the training later. That is the biggest plus to online training. Materials can be reviewed as often as necessary. The obvious downside to online training is that you lose the personal touch. If the pandemic taught us anything, it would be that the best possible training program


contains both in-person as well as on-line components.”

In any event, as Jenkins of Cintas points out, online training is here to stay. Whatever its limits, people need to shed their biases, such as not wanting to see themselves on a Zoom monitor and look for the opportunities and the value of online learning. “We know how to interact in person,” he says. “You recognize nonverbal cues. Up until COVID, most of our interpersonal skills were learned through live, in-person interactions. You were more comfortable doing things live because of your experience. As we get more comfortable with remote or on-line interaction, we will improve our abilities to interact through this medium and the training experience will improve. A recent *Harvard Business Review* article discusses how some myths and biases are reducing our effectiveness during on-line interaction.”

Dan Gonder, a training specialist and president of Strategic In/Sight Partners, Findlay, OH, says it’s incumbent on corporate leaders to set priorities for training and take whatever steps are needed for their organizations to move forward. “Online training has multiple benefits,” he says. “However, the biggest challenge with online training is the temptation for the user

to multi-task or click through in a rapid fashion, which can often negate the impact on the learner. Additionally, not everyone has a learning style that is conducive to online training. My suggestion for training leaders is to ensure clear expectations for the environment and process to use online training. I also recommend following up online training programs with an in-person group review of concepts to focus on refreshing and retaining the information and discussing practical application in the group. Including these all-important steps will avoid the ‘check the box’ mentality that too often comes into play in training programs.”

For Maida, either online or in-person training can work—so long as you have an employee with a positive attitude toward learning. He describes a recent client visit, noting that, “They had several new people in soil,” he says. “They were bringing them in three at a time. They had a couple of groups of three because they’d expanded. I watched the video at the same time with the supervisor and he’s pointing this out. ‘You do this right?’ That to me is really helping these folks. But you’ve got to have a willing trainee.” **TS**

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