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Hoffman Car Wash Goes Paperless

By Alan M. Petrillo

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Going "green" is all the rage these days and carwash operators are not being left out. And while many carwashes are turning to solar hot water heating, solar and wind generation of electricity, and water conservation and reuse, other types of green conservation are being explored as well.

Hoffman Car Wash in Albany, NY, which boasts 18 carwash and lube center locations throughout the Capital District and Hudson Valley regions, already has a number of "green" initiatives in place, including water reclamation systems and waste oil burners that are used to help heat buildings, but now it's going "green" in the office – by eliminating much of the paper-oriented records and documents used to support operations.

Tom Hoffman Jr., chief operating officer of Hoffman Car Wash, said the system they purchased – CNG-Safe from Cabinet NG of Madison, AL, is a full-fledged document retrieval system that means his company doesn't have to store paper documents any more.

"We bought Kodak scanners for the Accounts Payable, Accounts Receivable, Payroll and Human Resources folks, and everything gets scanned into the system to help reduce the handling of paper in the office," Hoffman said. "It also helps with quick retrieval of information for future reference."

Hoffman noted that a search through a paper-based system, such as records located in filing cabinets, might be very time consuming, depending on how the piece of information was filed.

"But with this system, we're able to search the database and get the answer quickly, instead of going through those filing cabinets," Hoffman said.

He also pointed out that the system has workflow capabilities, "where we can send out an invoice for approval to a district manager, where the system emails him and sends the invoice as an attachment. The manager then responds by email and it's all handled electronically."

Jim True, vice president of business development for Cabinet NG, said his firm's specialty is document management to help improve the efficiencies of higher-end operations.

"In Hoffman's case, we put in a system to manage accounts payable, invoices and receivables, as well as managing information in the workflow for different people to have access and approval rights to it," True said. "They (Hoffman employees) are able to file contracts and other documents directly into Cabinet NG."

True said his company is focused on helping businesses move away from a paper-based filing process.

"We eliminate that by automating it through an electronic document management system," he said. "You drag the information electronically into the vendor folder and we have

it. If it comes in on paper, they scan it into the system and then we've captured it."

True cited four instances why carwashes might turn toward a paperless solution for their business.

The first, he said, is when the business is running out of space and doesn't have any more room for filing cabinets. The second is for compliance reasons, that is, keeping documents tidy for audits.

An efficiency concern is the third reason True cites, especially when information is getting lost or is hard to find. The fourth instance, according to True, is the cost of making copies and storing them in filing cabinets.

"People usually have concerns in one or more of those areas, and if they do, they are pretty good drivers to consider going toward electronic document management," True said.

William Lawrence, chairman of Bubbles Enterprises Ltd., in Houston, TX, operates Bubbles Hand Wash and Bubbles Express, a chain of 12 carwashes, all in Houston – seven exterior washes and five full-serve conveyorized hand washes.

"We built our first conveyor wash in 1991 and as we grew to five hand wash locations, we were constantly asking, 'If I were Natalie, where would I have stored this piece of information?'" Lawrence said. "When we had an invoice for a conveyor section, it could be filed under the name of the vendor or under the fact that it's a conveyor part."

In addition to finding the information, Lawrence said he was operating in small office quarters and was running out of space.

"We had a problem we had to solve and the answer was electronic document filing," he said. "But our company was very well versed in technology, having used corporate email, websites and a wide area network between our locations, so we weren't afraid to make an investment in technology."

Lawrence said he and his staff investigated four paperless document storage companies and eventually settled on Cabinet NG after viewing an online demonstration that was so compelling, he bought the product.

"We have more than 300 associates in 12 locations and don't have one single piece of paper related to those associates or accounts payable or corporate documents," Lawrence said. "We have no file cabinets other than to hold real estate closing binders that our attorneys send us, and file folders of title certifications. All our new hire paperwork, pay history, employee action forms, documentation and material generated for payroll every two weeks is scanned directly into Cabinet NG." ■

Alan M. Petrillo is a freelance writer in Tucson, AZ, and contributing editor of *Northeast Carwasher*.

