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New Laundromat Owner Undaunted by COVID-19 Business Challenges

Morton perseveres and opens California's The Laundry Room

After many years as a successful residential property manager, Denise Morton decided it was time for a change and entered into the vended laundry business.

Her decision was not a hasty one; it was informed by knowledgeable acquaintances and backed by many months of research and time spent searching for the right property.

Eventually, Morton found the perfect situation for her after a few false starts: an outdated laundromat in a highly visible location in a densely packed neighborhood. The clincher was that she formed an immediate connection to the former owner which not only favored her sale offer, it eased her transition into the business.

Morton acquired The Laundry Room, a 3,200-square-foot Culver City, Calif., laundromat, in January 2020. She put an extensive remodeling plan into action, working with Michael Ambrose of Dexter distributor Western State Design. This

involved upgrading the laundromat in stages so she could keep it open for business, retaining her customer base and maintaining cash flow.

Unfortunately, Morton's careful plan was thrown into disarray when COVID-19 struck Southern California. Since laundromats had been decreed "essential" businesses, she could keep her doors open even during lockdown. The bad news was that customer traffic tailed off as people minimized their time spent in public. That forced Morton to pause construction.

As the virus-related business disruption continued for months on end, she says she was tempted, at times, to hand the keys over to her landlord and simply walk away from her new venture.

While there were overarching business challenges related to the pandemic that threatened to jeopardize her new business, other issues created headaches for Morton.

The laundromat's hot water heater stopped working the day after she took ownership. Rather than take a less-expensive "band-aid" repair approach, she invested in a state-of-the-art system consisting of four tankless water heaters.

Besides this, Morton called the national coin shortage a "nightmare." At times, she couldn't go more than four or five days (instead of the usual six to seven) without having to replenish her change machine.

But she stuck it out, thanks in part to her landlord's understanding and support. Now, after more than a year since she acquired her new business, she has finally celebrated its grand opening.

The renovation and retooling is complete—for now. She believes her laundromat has a fantastic look, and business is growing as new customers take notice. In addition to being impressed by the surroundings, brand-new Dexter Laundry equipment, and the store's customer service efforts, local customers are pleased to support a minority- and woman-owned neighborhood business.

Morton attributes The Laundry Room's growing popularity to many favorable features and amenities, including:

- Its proximity to other popular retail destinations in its area;
- Twenty-four private parking spaces adjacent to the entrance;
- Highly visible and attractive signage and exterior;
- Freshly painted walls and clean, polished floors, creating a bright and airy interior;
- A full complement of new Dexter coin- or card-operated commercial washers (12 T-400 30-pounders, nine T-600 40-pounders and four T-900 60-pounders, an increasingly popular large-capacity model), and dryers (10 50x2 [50-pound pockets] reversing stacks and six 30x2 stacks), all visible through the large front windows;
- A change machine;
- Vending machines offering popular laundry products;
- Free Wi-Fi, plus USB charging stations;



On the day of The Laundry Room's grand opening, owner Denise Morton (right) points out some features to Mike Bonin, 11th District council member for the City of Los Angeles.

- Large-screen TVs featuring popular movie streaming channels and Atmosphere TV;
- Attendants on duty (store is partially attended weekdays, full-time on weekends) to assist customers; and
- A wash-and-fold service (introduced during the early days of COVID-19, rather than later as originally planned).

Morton praised Ambrose for his assistance, saying he "truly guided me along my new laundromat business journey with his expertise and patience. He didn't act at all like a typical salesperson; he was more like an advisor/mentor/partner."

Looking forward, Morton intends to add pickup and delivery service sometime during the second half of this year, and she plans to pursue local commercial laundry business.

In the meantime, she's determined to continue learning as much as she can about her new industry by joining various trade associations and networking with industry leaders.

Morton concedes that the challenges of running a small business such as this one will remain, even as the pandemic's threat recedes. But she promises that she'll be ready for them.

"Because of my property management background, I am conditioned and prepared for the plethora of mishaps that can occur: leaks, flooding, power outages, broken machines, angry customers, graffiti, you name it," she says.

And there are aspects of her new job that she likes: "What I do prefer about the laundry business is the repeat face-to-face interaction with customers in the store, as compared to phone or email interactions with tenants."

Morton says she is confident that if she provides a good product, is responsive to people's needs and provides a high level of customer service—and continues with her long-term approach of investing in new equipment—The Laundry Room will be successful.

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