

Planet Laundry

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BUSINESS PROFILE

STEVEN GOULD



A 'Golden' Opportunity

New Jersey Laundry Owner Celebrates 50 Years in the Business

Frank Lambing is a “veteran” in every sense of the word. He has been in the laundry business for 50 years. He spent 34 years as a postal worker. And he also is a former soldier, having served in the armed forces right out of high school.

In fact, it was Lambing’s stint in the Army that gave birth to what would become his lifelong calling in the self-service laundry industry.

Lambing had been involved in retail business since he was 12 years old and slicing lunchmeat at a small mom-and-pop grocery store in his hometown. While going to high school, he earned money working various part-time retail jobs.

However, upon graduation, he joined the Army. During this time, he and his buddies would head into town to do their laundry, and the store they frequented featured the classic “Big Blue” machines by Westinghouse.

Those really caught Lambing’s eye. “I would really like to own one of these places,” he recalled thinking at the time.

Lambing explained that one thing he learned in the Army was how to face up to a challenge. So, when he was discharged in August 1960, he knew exactly what he wanted to do.



“I really wanted the challenge of building a business from nothing into a profitable operation,” he said. “My family had some land where they used to have a raspberry field – so I had a location.”

Now all he needed was some money, a building and equipment to fill it up. His brother helped him build the facility, and he scraped together some cash to purchase the equipment. All in all, the process took about five months and cost Lambing about 10 grand (in 1961 dollars).

The whole process was very straightforward, according to Lambing – no real surprises or setbacks. And, in July 1961, Lamb Launderette in Williamstown, N.J., opened for business.

Of course, over the last 50 years, Lambing has experienced many inevitable marketplace changes and demographic shifts to his customer base. Today, most of the store’s customers are African-American and Hispanic. In addition, Lambing has benefited greatly by catering to the many seasonal construction workers in the area; however, with the current economy, their numbers have decreased.

Fortunately, when you’ve been in business as long as Lambing, you build a loyal following. As a result, some of

his customers travel 10 miles or more and actually pass other laundromats just to come to his store, he said.

Lambing has only one competitor within a five-mile radius of the laundry, yet he noted that he still does a good share of advertising or promotion. He runs ads on the placemats at some of the local diners. In addition, he is closely involved with a number of civic organizations and places coupons in their entertainment books. What’s more, he even donated a dryer to the local high school football team so that they could take care of their uniforms.

Lambing is a “hands-on” laundry owner. No, he doesn’t spend 24 hours a day at Lamb Launderette, but he is there enough so that his customers know they will be able to speak to him if needed. And they know he will be responsive to their issues and concerns. They know that his presence at the business makes it a place that they can count on.

The store is always spotless and the equipment is always functioning properly, according to Lambing.

“I’ve been doing this for so long that I have developed a ‘laundromat ear,’” he explained. “I can just walk into the store and listen – and I know which piece of equipment needs a little maintenance or fine tuning.”

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In addition to its longevity, Lamb Launderette is somewhat unique in that it is very much like two businesses in one. The laundry is located in a stand-alone building surrounded by a grassy area. It is a 2,400-square-foot facility, which is divided into two 1,200-square-foot “stores.”

One section contains high-end machines and has an attendant on duty from when the store opens at 6 a.m.

until closing at 11 p.m. By contrast, the other section is open 24 hours and is more basic.

Lamb Launderette shares the neighborhood with garden supplies store across the street, a CVS pharmacy on the corner and a busy shopping center down the road – all businesses that have helped drive traffic through the laundromat.



In addition to his self-service customers, Lambing also offers a wash-dry-fold service – and it comes with a nice perk for his attendants. The store provides the service for \$1 per pound, with a 10-pound minimum. And Lambing – who employs six attendants – turns all of the profits over to his staff.

The drop-off service operates under a same-day rule simply due to the store’s lack of storage space.

“I have every square inch of the building filled with equipment,” Lambing said. “There just isn’t anywhere I could store the laundry.”

Lamb Launderette is about as old school as it gets – there’s no Internet access, arcade games or televisions. And these amenities don’t seem to be missed – nor are the potential headaches that these “extras” might cause Lambing.

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However, the store does feature a couple of bill changers, soda and snack machines, and of course a soap vending machine for those who forget their detergent or run out in the middle of doing their laundry.

After 50 years, Lambing is not looking to open any other coin laundries. But he is constantly learning new ways to improve his current store. He keeps up on the

latest trends by reading the industry magazines. And he attends all of the trade shows; in fact, he doesn't recall ever missing a Clean Show, and he said he still learns something new each time.

"At the last show, they were showing some new technology, and I have implemented it over the last few weeks," Lambing noted. "I don't want to give anything

away, but it worked out for me and I'm happy. Everyday in this business is a new learning experience.

"From the time I opened the doors until today, it's been a learning process," he added. "If it's come up before, you know how to handle it. If you haven't seen it before, you learn something from it. But nothing is ever really a total surprise. That's a perspective you learn in the Army – and it's an approach that has served me well."

Steven Gould is a freelance writer based in the Chicago area.



Equipment Mix Lamb Launderette Williamstown, N.J.

16 Speed Queen toploaders.....	\$1.75	10 R&B Wire Products laundry carts	
10 Maytag 20-pound frontloaders.....	\$2.00	• Solomatic seating units	
8 Maytag 25-pound frontloaders.....	\$2.50	• Solomatic folding tables	
4 Milnor 40-pound frontloaders	\$4.00	• Vinyl tile flooring	
2 Maytag 50-pound frontloaders.....	\$5.00	1 soda vending machine	
2 Dexter 80-pound frontloaders	\$8.00	1 snack vending machine	
12 ADC dryers	25 cents for six minutes	• Wash-dry-fold service:.....	\$1 per pound; 10-pound minimum
12 Maytag dryers	25 cents for six minutes		
1 Hamilton Engineering water heating system			
2 Standard Change-Makers bill changers			

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