

green entrepreneurs



Ed Longanecker, Iris City Cleaners and Laundering Co.

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Service. Cleaner that has converted to green methods. Now 60 percent of cleaning service use advanced technology wet cleaning.

Business Started. 1984

Location. Mt. Pleasant, Iowa

Award. First fully Certified Green Cleaner in the state of Iowa, received four leaves from the Green Cleaning Council

Business Philosophy. "It's a bit more expensive (to use eco-friendly vendors) but it's something that we do because it's the right thing to do."

A couple of years ago, Ed Longanecker, the owner of Iris City Cleaners and Laundering Co. since 1989, told Sally Conant, executive director of the Association of Wedding Gown Specialists, that their Zero-Carbon Footprint Offset program was one of the most ridiculous ideas he had ever heard of.¹

"I didn't think that anyone would want to spend any more money on an already expensive process," recalls Ed, "but the more I looked into it, the more I began to think, 'Wait a minute, this is bigger than I thought.'" It was at this point that Ed began to take note of things that Iris City Cleaners and Laundering Co. was already doing to reduce waste and conserve energy. Since then, Iris City Cleaners and Laundering Co., located in historic downtown Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, has become a leader in the nation for green cleaning services, and has the credentials to prove it.

Already holding certification as a Professional Dry Cleaner, an Environmental Dry Cleaner, a Professional Wet Cleaner, and a Garment Care Professional, as well as winning the Award of Excellence Cleaner Award; Iris City became the first fully Certified Green Cleaner in the state of Iowa, receiving four leaves from the Green Cleaning Council, in December 2009. Developed by the National Cleaners Association in 2008, the Green Cleaning Council provides dry cleaners with a reliable and definable standard by

¹ The Association of Wedding Gown Specialists accounts for the carbon footprint of wedding gown preservation with donations to Carbonfund.org, a nonprofit carbon offset and climate solutions organization that uses donations to help fund reforestation projects worldwide.



which to measure their environmental sustainability efforts and commitment to conservation. In doing so, the program provides cleaners' with a verifiable measure for authenticity of their 'green' claims, exposing the problem of 'greenwashing.' "A lot of people are badgering green," reflects Ed on the trend among companies to promote themselves as green for marketing purposes without putting green claims into practice or taking real measures of environmental sustainability.

The Green Cleaning Council rating system gives cleaners something to strive for. The highest designation a cleaner can achieve is a five-leaf rating. Currently, the cleaner with the highest rating in the country, with four-and-a-half leaves, is Lansing Cleaners in Lansing, Illinois. "Lansing Cleaners is a pioneer in effective energy management and sustainability," Ed says. He attributes this extra half-leaf to the fact that Lansing Cleaners is a member of the Illinois Green Fleet and has a fleet of compressed natural gas delivery vehicles, something Iris City Cleaners and Laundering Co. sees as a potential green initiative for the future.² To become a Certified Green Cleaner, cleaners are rated based on the cleaner's wet cleaning capabilities, recycling programs, investment in goods or services that exceed regulatory requirements, water and energy conservation, and education and training in environmental regulations.

The dry cleaning industry has traditionally been known as anything but green.

According to Ed, there were far fewer regulations in place for the cleaning industry twenty years ago. Due to the use of harsh chemicals, high water usage, and production of waste in the form of disposable bags and hangers,

² The Illinois Green Fleets program is a voluntary program where businesses, government units, and other organizations gain recognition and additional marketing opportunities for having clean, green, domestic, renewable, American fuel vehicles in their fleet.

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cheap. Cleaners focused on cleaning clothing and a few household items,” remembers Ed. Since then, new types of cleaning services have emerged and the dry cleaning industry has changed dramatically. In this manner, the green movement and the creation of the Green Cleaning Council has prompted a significant transition for Iris City Cleaners and Laundering Co., as well as for the dry cleaning industry as a whole.

Greener Building, Greener Ways

The physical site of Iris City Cleaners & Laundering Co. has housed dry cleaning services since 1947, but the building and equipment has gone through dramatic improvements. Taking advantage of the Mt. Pleasant Exterior Improvement Grant, funded by the Main Street Mt. Pleasant program, Iris City completely remodeled the exterior of the shop. The plant is now wrapped with an Exterior Insulation and Finish System (EIFS) stucco wall-sheathing.

In an effort to reduce energy consumption, Ed plans to reconsider the type and extent of insulation on all heat generating and heat maintaining equipment in the future. “We’re pretty well weatherized. We’ve enveloped the entire building with Styrofoam in the exterior walls.” Iris City has also taken advantage of the Alliant Energy rebates available to commercial buildings

Iris City is currently exploring LED retrofit.

and has installed energy-efficient windows and moved forward with the second phase of complete roof insulation. “The cap on the Alliant Energy rebates is \$10,000 and we’ve split the cost between last year and this year.” Iris City has taken advantage of

³ The volatile organic solvent most often used by dry cleaners, perchlorethylene—otherwise known as ‘perc’—may pose serious health hazards to dry cleaning workers who routinely breathe excessive amounts of the solvent vapor or spill it on their skin.



“We recycle as much as we can.” city services to assist in the cost of weatherizing their building, but many of the city rebate programs aren’t significant enough for the scope of what Iris City Cleaners needs.

Another potential investment for Iris City Cleaners is renewable energy. “We have some renewable energy options in mind. We look at those things all the time to lower our costs and energy use.” Other future initiatives include exploring LED lighting in strategic locations to replace the high energy-efficient fluorescent fixtures. Iris City is currently working with professionals at Lansing Cleaners in exploring LED retrofit. The plant already has motion sensor lighting control in remote locations. “The savings will probably cut our lighting cost to 50 percent of what it is now,” explains Ed Longanecker.

Outside of energy efficiency, Iris City takes a pro-active approach to waste reduction and water conservation. “We recycle as much as we can.” With their ‘No Plastic Please’ program, Iris City gives customers the option to forgo having their items returned to them in disposable plastic garment bags. Customers can also elect to retrieve their clothing on cardboard hangers, as cardboard is a recyclable material.

A by-product of the dry cleaning process is sludge, generated by extracting dirt and grime from people’s clothing. “We do a process to extract the cleaning solution from the sludge and then incinerate the sludge at high temperatures.” While about 40 percent of Iris City’s business is still dry cleaning, the other 60 percent of their cleaning services use advanced technology wet cleaning. Wet cleaning is a non-toxic, environmentally safe alternative to dry cleaning. The process involves the use of computer-controlled washing machines. “It helps to have a Certified Professional Wet Cleaner in house,” adds Longanecker.

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Wet Cleaning is the EPA-preferred cleaning method and actually reduces water consumption when compared to dry cleaning. Instead of using city water in order to maintain required temperatures for dry cleaning equipment during the cleaning process, and sending reusable grey water to the sewer system, Iris City uses a water chiller to re-circulate temperature-controlled water.

Iris City belongs to the Energy Star Alliance and has had an energy audit completed to target areas needing attention to increase the plant’s energy efficiency. For example they’re already using a swamp cooler for pressing floor cooling and air circulation.

While one of the tasks on Ed’s to-do list is to develop literature to market Iris City’s green, conservation, and stewardship initiatives, he currently uses e-mail for promotional material and advertising and marketing materials are now printed with soy-based ink. Iris City also utilizes some paperless invoicing.

A League of Their Own

Not only is their list of green initiatives in the physical site of operations extensive, Iris City’s list of services is comprehensive as well; ranging from shoe repair to tent and linen rentals, disaster recovery and fire restoration to leather cleaning, and wedding gown preservation to in-home carpet cleaning. In the cleaning industry, diversification is key.

Ed describes Iris City Cleaners and Laundering Co.’s list of services as rare for a dry cleaning company of their size, “or of any size, for that matter. There are so many drycleaners in our area who don’t belong to any associations or even have a website.” In this way, Iris City is ahead of the game. They see attending national conferences and the use of specialized



consultations as imperative for their business' continued growth and success. In fact, the Iris City staff has spent three days with Lean Enterprise Institute Trainer, Dave Pomeroy of Dave Pomeroy Signature Training, who happens to be an Iris City customer.

Lean is a production practice that evaluates every step of each operation to make them more effective and less time, resource, and energy consuming, with the primary intent of eliminating or reducing waste. It is not necessarily intended to save money, though this is often a result of the practice of streamlining operations. "In our business, Lean training is a method of thinking about making things go better; using our resources more wisely and eliminating waste, in material, in process and in human energy." While Lean is an ongoing process, many benchmarks have been achieved resulting from Iris City Cleaners' exposure to Lean thinking.

"We don't really see the other drycleaners in the area as competitors," states Ed, "as they're not going after going green on a larger scale like we're trying to do." Aside from owning and operating Iris City, Ed is also a used cleaning equipment broker. "Locally, I know what goes on in other plants. Some do wet cleaning, but not many. We differentiate ourselves by belonging to associations and keeping our standards high." These standards stretch beyond the services offered at Iris City.

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Every year, Iris City sponsors a Share The Warmth campaign and offers free cleaning services for people who are out of work but who want to look their best at job interviews.

Giving Back

Participating in eco-friendly activity in the community and state, Iris City supports conservation and recycling efforts in the area. However, the bulk of the support Iris City has received in regards to their green efforts has come from the National



Ed's dedication to the community is apparent.

Cleaning Council. "If you Google who's doing green stuff in the Midwest, you're not going to find a whole lot." While Ed admits that the spectrum of green is limited in Mt. Pleasant and surrounding areas, and feels that services available to green businesses are often geared toward start-up businesses rather than those that are established, his dedication to the community is apparent.

Every year, Iris City sponsors a Share The Warmth campaign, cleans donated coats and blankets, and gives them to the local charities to deliver to those in need. In addition, they offer free cleaning services for people who are out of work but want to look their best for interviews and offer complimentary linen services for many community events. "There is not a whole lot of support locally toward doing green stuff," states Ed, matter-of-factly. Nonetheless, he recognizes that going green has potential business benefits.

Challenges

However small the presence of eco-minded consumers is in the Midwest, Ed knows that the green aspects of his business give him a competitive edge that seems to be increasing every year. He sees the Maharishi Vedic City, a community promoting itself as the 'healthiest city in America' and located about 20 miles northwest of Mt. Pleasant, as a possible niche market.⁴

Creating a green market is one of the things Iris City is working towards, and is addressing the challenges of planning a route. Creating a route in the dry cleaning business can be a little tricky. Ed has contacts in the dry cleaning business all over the country and when he compares the demographics of the Mt. Pleasant and surrounding region with those of his colleagues, he sees the area as a challenge. Ed refers to a colleague's

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⁴ Maharishi Vedic City was incorporated in 2001 and dedicated as a national center for world peace and perfect health.



Resources

Iris City Cleaners and Laundering Company
iriscitycleaners.com

Green Cleaners Council
www.greencleanerscouncil.com

National Cleaners Association
www.nca-i.com/about.html
The American Dry Cleaner: Rating System for Green Cleaners Debuts
www.americandrycleaners.com/article.cfm?articleID=17767

National Cleaning Association Introduces Green Certification Program
www.greenbiz.com/news/2008/10/09/rating-system-green-cleaners-debuts

Association of Wedding Gown Specialists
www.weddinggownspecialists.com/index.htm

Illinois Green Fleet
www.illinoisgreenfleets.org/fact-sheet.html#1

Lean Enterprise Institute
www.lean.org

OSHA Guidelines for Dry Cleaners: Perc
www.osha.gov/dsg/guidance/perc.html

Mt. Pleasant Chamber of Commerce
www.mountpleasantiowa.org/alliance/business/localfunding.aspx

Iris City seeks out vendors who supply them with eco-friendly equipment, supplies, and chemicals.

\$250,000 and the median income is \$150,000. “We don’t have that here in our area. That’s an issue of the economy.” One of the future initiatives Ed keeps in mind is to increase networking with other in the industry who aggressively adopt conservation and green stewardship.

Another challenge is that of finding suppliers in the area who will offer green products for Iris City Cleaners, such as biodegradable poly garment bags. Iris City’s ‘Green Objective’ states that they seek out vendors who supply them with eco-friendly equipment, supplies, and chemicals, establish business relations with those vendors, and utilize eco-friendly products even in though they cost more. “It’s a bit more expensive but it’s something that we do because it’s the right thing to do.” And it seems the right thing to do is somewhat of a business motto for Ed Longanecker.

business in Greeley, Colorado and says that a route won’t even be established unless the median value of the homes on the route is over



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