

**BUSINESS PROFILE: APPARELMASTER**



**KARLUM LATTIMORE**

Bevan and Bill Ritchie.

# KEEPING IT CLEAN

If you're a mechanic, panel beater or dealership, your work clothes are probably supplied and cleaned by one of the 28 Apparelmaster laundries around the country.

Each week these laundries collect, clean and deliver back thousands of garments worn by staff of MTA members. Keeping track of each garment and getting it back to the right wearer is becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Apparelmaster Managing Director Bevan Ritchie says, "These days all our laundries use sophisticated computer programmes to drive the laundry and delivery process. For some this includes using RFID (radio frequency identification) chips sewn into each garment; others use barcode technology. We still have some small laundries which use information codes printed on a label inside the garment - a system that has worked well for over 40 years."

Bevan says the software to support the sophisticated automated laundry systems being used in all Apparelmaster operations was developed in New Zealand. "We commissioned the \$1.2m project from

Invercargill company Strategic Software and it has now been in place for about two years. This software and earlier work done on our marketing and corporate way of working have really had a big impact on efficiency, professionalism and relationships with customers."

## WORKER SCAMS

It's rare for garments to mixed up or lost to the system, unlike the early days - before Bevan's father Bill Ritchie set up the company and its printed tracking system in Wellington.

"There were some really costly scams running in some big automotive companies. Staff would 'lose' their overalls and get a replacement issued to them with no checking done. They'd wear those 'lost' overalls at home for a year or two and then turn them in and get a new replacement. I know of one company where this scam cost them \$60,000 in new work gear in



Bevan Ritchie shows off the huge washing machine that can work through 195kg of garments per cycle.

one year, everyone was in on it because there was no tracking and no system for issuing new work clothes. When we bid for the contract, back in the '80s, our laundry service was more expensive than the one the company had been using but there was no component for replacing lost clothing. Instead we guaranteed we would replace lost garments for free. Under our system, each garment was labelled and issued to a specific individual. In our first year, just one garment was lost. The scam stopped immediately and the company saved money.

## BRIEF HISTORY

Bill Ritchie and business partner John Taylor (Taylors Dry Cleaners) moved into the Apparelmaster laundry business after buying first the Wellington licence, then the national licence from the US - based company. "The drycleaning business was shrinking and we needed something to keep us going and growing," said Bill.

The first MTA member to sign up was Trevor Edwards of Edwards Panel and Paint in Miramar.

"I went out selling the service and signed up Trevor and two other neighbouring automotive businesses on my first day - and he's still with us."

Bevan Ritchie says Apparelmaster is proud and appreciative of the loyalty of their core customers. "We have moved into linen supply and a range of other laundry services, but automotive businesses still make up about 30 percent of our work.



Working on the ironer in Hawkes Bay.



**The drycleaning business was shrinking and we needed something to keep us going and growing."**



Manager of Wellington Apparelmaster Mark Stewart, with Wendy Barton checking garments on a work table.





Bill Ritchie examines a shirt destined for MTA members Rolrich Panel & Spray.

“Many of these businesses, like us, are a family business and are still using our services two or three generations later.” He believes the customers like the fact that the service is provided by local owner-operators. (The laundries operate under licence using Apparelmaster systems and branding.) Each laundry has its own ‘area’ to operate within, something that hasn’t been without its trials and tribulations. Bill remembers the areas being marked out on a map of the country in an ad hoc fashion back in the 1980s at an AGM. “It was done using a thick Sharpie pen and was agreed to by all the licencees in a unanimous vote.”

### BOUNDARIES

But Bevan says that over the years, the thickness of the boundaries has caused problems with debates over which customers are inside or outside the line. “That problem has now been solved with electronic mapping and two years of negotiations.”

The company is no longer bound to the US Apparelmaster operation. Bill Ritchie bought all the rights and trademarks for Australasia outright in the 1990s. “We haven’t done anything in Australia but perhaps one of the next generation will,” says Bill.

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Sales Manager Daniel Craig chats to delivery driver Kyle Keast outside the Petone laundry.



Interior of the new Diamond Apparelmaster in Hawkes Bay.

### KEEPING TRACK

Printed codes on labels sewn into garments like this one tell a story:

- 3** is the staff member’s ID
- MON** – is the day the delivery driver exchanges dirty garments for clean
- 1234** – the customer number, which also links to the delivery driver’s route
- R&B Upper Hutt** – company name: Rutherford and Bond Upper Hutt
- NICK** – the wearer’s name
- #M** – size medium
- A17** – tells the age of the garment in this case new in January 2017.
- 5** – Nick has five garments issued to him – which actually means Apparelmaster has 11 assigned to him – five for wearing, five in the wash and one spare.

Bevan says, “The RFID chips and barcodes can store a lot more information – such as when the garment was repaired, when it might need replacing and in automated laundries the code sends the garment to the right racks for delivery, mending, washing, replacing and so on.”



Around a third of the company’s laundry business is made up of uniforms and work gear worn by people working in the automotive sector.