

# **SOUTH SHORE INSIDER - ROBERT DEVANEY - THE PERFECT SHIRT: Dry cleaning chain owner says new \$60K machines can press clothes like they were done by hand**

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- [Photos](#)

## **Photos**



Robert Devaney, president of the Drycleaning by Dorothy and The Cleaner Spot chains, has purchased new pressing machines that turn out 200 shirts per hour n each looking like it was ironed by hand. (GARY HIGGINS/The Patriot Ledger)

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By ALYSA LANDRY  
The Patriot Ledger

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WEYMOUTH - As head of a dry cleaning plant that processes more than 2,000 shirts every day, Robert Devaney is hard pressed to produce the perfect shirt.

That's why the 54-year-old president of the Drycleaning by Dorothy and The Cleaner Spot chains spent \$60,000 last month on new pressing machines that turn out 200 shirts per hour - each looking like it was ironed by hand.

Devaney got his start in the industry more than 30 years ago. He was pursuing a degree in speech pathology at Northeastern University when his father, a retired dry cleaner, convinced him to join the family business.

The father-son team purchased the Weymouth-based Drycleaning by Dorothy in 1976. Devaney later founded the Fresh ♦n' Clean and Lapels franchises and opened 42 stores

in five states. He has since sold both franchises.

His latest franchise endeavor, The Cleaner Spot, already has nine locations on the South Shore. The Weymouth plant employs 35 people and processes items from the three corporate-owned Drycleaning by Dorothy drop-off stores and The Cleaner Spot franchises.

Devaney lives in Marshfield with his wife.

### **How do trends toward more casual dress affect the dry cleaning business?**

Casual dress has affected the dry cleaning industry in a big way over the last five to 10 years. It's reduced the amount of volume that we've had.

The industry has developed new equipment and new methods to handle casual dress. When you press a pair of khakis, for instance, it's different than pressing a pair of wool slacks. Often the khakis need to be wet cleaned instead of dry cleaned, and that makes them harder to finish and press. There's machines that actually grab the bottom of the pants and pull it down, and it helps it to give it a better press. So that press became much more popular with the advent of casual clothing.

It's great and it's fine to dress casually, but it doesn't mean you have to sacrifice a professional look. So if you want to dress in khakis and a polo shirt, but you still want to have that professional image to help you sell or whatever it is you do in your business, it's best to have those items cleaned and professionally pressed.

The casual trend is changing. Suit sales are up.... The new layered looks with wools and natural fabrics (generate business), but casual dress is here to stay.

### **How have Environmental Protection Agency regulations changed the business?**

It has given us additional costs. Additional education was needed, and new equipment was needed.

Equipment manufacturers were really forced to come up with more efficient equipment - equipment that didn't pollute the atmosphere. In our industry, they call it closed-loop systems, so instead of venting out the odors into the atmosphere, it is now all self-contained. And, in that process, it made it much more efficient, so that we actually use a lot less of the chemicals now to do the same volume.

In addition to that, after the dry cleaning process is completed, you end up with a residue which is considered a hazardous waste. Dry cleaners are forced to take that waste and handle it a certain way, and put it into barrels, and then have it professionally removed.

Now the newest thing in dry cleaning is environmentally friendly, (but) ... even plants that claim to have an environmentally-friendly process, (use) chemicals that are not

environmentally friendly. There's really, truly, no completely environmentally-friendly dry cleaner, unless they just wash everything.

**You've recently purchased new equipment to produce the perfectly pressed shirt. What is the perfect shirt?**

If you bring a sweater into 10 dry cleaners, you're (not going) to see the difference in quality. ...You don't take a mustard stain on a silk blouse to five dry cleaners, so it's really hard to see.

But, in general, what really sets dry cleaners apart is the shirts, the quality of their shirts, because you can very readily see the difference. You can very readily see if there's a broken button on the shirt, if there's a big crease down the sleeve, and shirts have been the war (among) dry cleaners.

You'll see 99-cent shirts all over the place, so customers have become very attuned to the cost of shirts. Because of that, shirts are done on mass production equipment. They're actually processed at about 100-plus shirts per hour, whereas a dry cleaning item that's hand-ironed and hand-pressed is only done at maybe 15 or 20 an hour.

You could always do a perfect shirt if you wanted (to) hand-iron the whole shirt. That doesn't happen anymore because cleaners can't afford to do that. Until a new company (Japan's Sankosha) came on the horizon and developed a shirt machine that is able to continue the same volume - 150 to 200 shirts an hour - but turn out a perfect shirt. After 30 years in the business, I was amazed.

**You've launched your third franchise, The Cleaner Spot. What makes this different?**

This whole economy works on incentive. I realized a while back that nobody's ever going to care more than the owner, so the whole concept of The Cleaner Spot is that every store is managed by the owner.

The owner is there when you come in. He's working 40 to 50 hours a week, so that you're going to get the ultimate in service. The owner specifically inspects every single piece that goes through that store so you know you're going to get the best quality because that guy cares more than a typical high school kid that may be working at some dry cleaners.

Our (drop stores) are small, little 1,000-square-foot stores that we can conveniently locate anywhere. Dry cleaning is a convenience-based business, and people typically go to the cleaner that's close to home, close to work, and we're able to locate our drop stores right in those communities. Big dry cleaning plants are not allowed typically anymore in those areas because of the chemical concerns and the environmental problems.