



Ace ImageWear: Houston Independent Built on First Names, Follow- Through and Focus

Inside Ace ImageWear's Texas HQ, where family ownership, operational discipline and technology fuel growth

By Jason Risley

Above: Staff sew garments on the floor of Ace ImageWear's Houston plant.

By the time customers visit Ace ImageWear's Houston facility, most already understand what makes the company different. They know their route driver by their first name. Their troubles with missing garments have disappeared. And often, they don't think about the upkeep of their company's uniform program at all—exactly the way Ace ImageWear wants it.

For more than 90 years, the family-owned company has grown on a simple promise: Do what you say you're going to do. In a market sector increasingly dominated by national providers, Ace ImageWear has carved out a niche in the industrial space with a disciplined path—blending three generations of ownership with thoughtful technology upgrades, empowered employees and a highly-focused operation.

Nowhere is that approach more visible than inside its 62,000-square-foot (5,759-square-meter) Houston plant, a purpose-built laundry facility designed to serve one of the most competitive and opportunity-rich markets for industrial operators in the U.S.

From a Basement to Beaumont, and on to Houston

Ace ImageWear's roots trace back to 1932, when Ed and Clara Heilman started a laundry during the Great Depression in the basement of their Kansas City home. The business was named Ace Linen Supply, after Ed Heilman Sr.'s nickname, which he earned during his time as a Golden Gloves boxer.

"They thought layoffs were coming, so Ed decided to strike out on his own—calling on grocery stores and bars to offer laundry rental services," says Ed Heilman, the third-generation owner of the Texas operation. "That basement led to a garage, then a building, then another location, and the business grew."

Over the decades, the company expanded into Texas, acquiring a laundry in Beaumont—a 100-year-old, multi-floor facility that the company operated out of for decades. But as the business grew, its limitations became clear. By 2009, when Heilman and his cousins bought out the second generation of owners, the strategic focus sharpened.

"The goal was to grow Houston until it was bigger than Beaumont," Heilman says. "Once that happened, we'd move the plant."

That move came in 2016, when Ace ImageWear purchased a building that previously operated as an AI's Formal Wear warehouse in Houston. The company then embarked on what would be a two-year transition into its new space.

Designing an Industrial Plant with Purpose

The former AI's Formal Wear building was originally used to store garments. This proved to be a fortunate coincidence for Ace ImageWear.

"They already had some garment conveying rails, a solid dock system and office space that lined up with what we needed," Heilman says.

The company preserved some of the building's original character, including repurposing exterior letters into interior decor, while redesigning the plant entirely for an industrial laundry operation. The result is a single-floor workflow that clearly

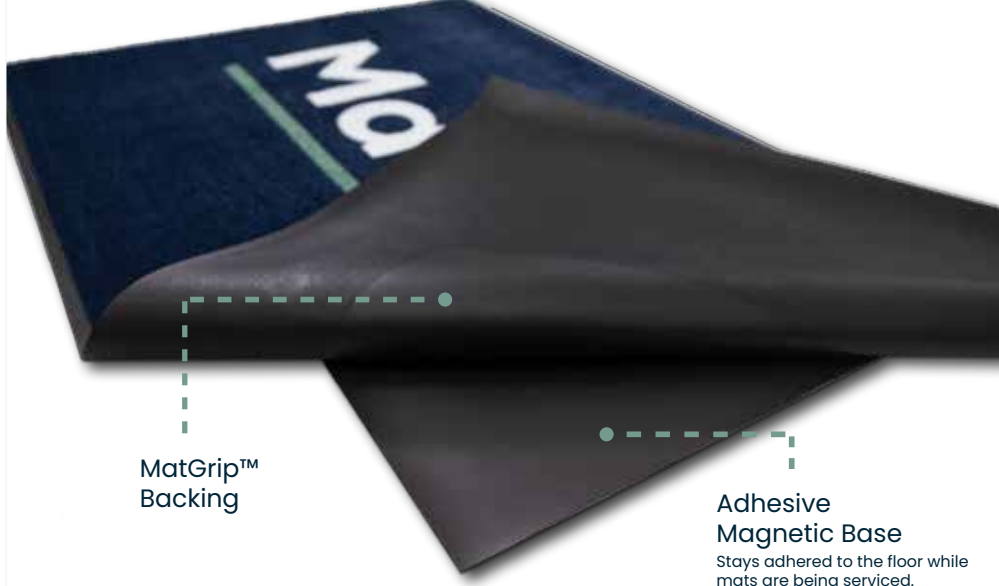
separates soil from clean, with color-coded systems and RFID-driven accountability at every stage.

The plant processes roughly 135,000 lbs. (61,234 kg.) of laundry per week, including running 35,000 to 40,000 garments through its tunnel finisher, along with mats, shop towels, aprons and bar towels. Mats are chipped and scanned just like garments. A mat-processing area



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on the production floor features mat roller systems.

At the front end, soiled goods arrive in clearly defined lots and batches, scanned immediately to establish chain-of-custody. The first sort organizes items by customer; a second sort later splits garments by wearer, with pants and shorts “married” to shirts to ensure complete sets. Chip data is transmitted wirelessly across the plant, enabling employees to track garments in real time at every station.

Focus as a Competitive Advantage

Ace ImageWear’s biggest strategic decision was not architectural—it was philosophical.

“We tell our sales team that they can sell anything they want, as long as it’s shirts and pants,” Heilman says.

That focus allows the company to excel at industrial uniforms while avoiding the complexity of health-care and hospitality processing. In the Houston market, which Heilman calls “probably the largest industrial

uniform market in the world,” that clarity matters.

“We believe in doing business the old-fashioned way—with hustle, hard work and on a first-name basis,” says Mike Galvan, director of service.

Competitors include national providers like Cintas Corp., UniFirst Corp. and AlSCO Uniforms, along with a shrinking number of independents. Ace ImageWear remains one of the largest independent operators focused solely on industrial garments.

“Independents can adapt and react quicker,” Heilman says. “And the relationships with our customers are different.”

Gregory Mills, director of sales, adds that, “You’re dealing with people who care—about their jobs, the customer’s brand and the company’s reputation. That’s the biggest separator.”

Smart Technology and Calculated Automation

Inside the soil-sorting area, **Positek RFID** readers track garments as they move toward the wash aisle.

Two **JENSEN Braun** 600 lb. (272 kg.) washers are supported by three additional 450 lb. (204 kg.) units, along with a newer **JENSEN Braun** 250 lb. (113 kg.) washer dedicated to garment processing. The facility’s laundry chemistry is supplied by **Gurtler Industries Inc.**

Recognizing that water is a commodity that will continue to increase in cost, Ace installed a split trench system that allows for separation of grey water for reuse. Two shaker screens remove lint before reuse or equalization. Because of Houston’s stringent wastewater requirements, Ace ImageWear installed a **Kemco Systems** dissolved air flotation (DAF) unit to treat the water prior to discharge.

Two air compressors support plant operations, along with three dryers—one **JENSEN Braun** and two **Consolidated Laundry Machinery** units—the newest of which was purchased at the 2025 Clean Show in Orlando, FL.

Throughout the plant, Heilman’s approach to automation remains pragmatic.

Below: (Left) Emblems are ready to be placed on customers’ garments. (Right) Uniform shirts and pants are stored and ready to be placed into service for delivery to Ace ImageWear’s customers throughout the Houston metropolitan area.





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Above (from top): A view of the wash aisle at Ace ImageWear's Houston facility. The Houston plant is powered by chemistry from **Gurtler Industries Inc.** Garments in slings waiting to be loaded into dryers.

"We don't invest in technology for technology's sake," he says. "It has to make sense."

That philosophy led Ace ImageWear to avoid some fully automated transfer systems in favor of simpler sling-based material handling. Partial automation improves efficiency without introducing single points of failure.

Clean Side, Finishing and Accountability

On the clean side of the plant, garments are loaded onto hangers and run through a **Colmac** garment finishing tunnel. Triple Buck presses handle detailed garment work, while smaller washers support specialty needs.

Any garment requiring attention—a missing button, damaged name tag or repair—is diverted to the mending area before re-entering production. All finished garments are scanned again in the bundle-verification area, ensuring that everything scanned in is scanned out. This reporting, showing customers exactly what was processed and returned, has become a valued differentiator and aids in retention and customer satisfaction. "That reporting tool is something customers really like," Heilman says.

Once verified, garments move to route lines numbered by truck assignment before being staged on the clean-side loading dock for next-day delivery. Trucks are loaded the night before, allowing drivers to leave before rush hour in the morning.

The Houston operation runs 14 routes, while five routes operate out of Beaumont, now served by a smaller 5,000-square-foot (464-square-meter) depot in a different building than the company previously operated out of when it was in that area. At the start of its move to the Houston facility, Ace

ImageWear ran 10 routes out of Houston and four in Beaumont.

A Plant Designed for People

Perhaps the most striking part of the Houston facility is what it doesn't feel like.

The center of the plant is air-conditioned—a remnant from Al's Formal Wear that Ace ImageWear intentionally preserved. Heat-generating equipment is isolated behind a separate wall, while most employees work in cooler, quieter conditions.

"If an operator has to choose between working in 100 degrees or 75 degrees, it's an easy decision," Heilman says.

That environment, combined with a four-day workweek, has helped Ace ImageWear recruit and retain employees in a tight labor market.

"We're treated as family, not just as a number," says Nitzia Florez, plant manager.

When Ace ImageWear shifted its operations from Beaumont, the company hired mostly new employees in Houston, as most of the Beaumont staff weren't going to make the 90-minute commute.

Safety, Discipline and Culture

Safety is reinforced daily. Temperature sticks and Wi-Fi-enabled sensors monitor goods that could pose fire risks, which are stored outside overnight. The plant recently recorded 539 days without a safety incident, following nearly five years without a recordable incident before that.

Employee safety committees meet regularly, and the city of Houston's

“Everybody here is empowered to do what they need to do to take care of the customer,” says Rick Ferguson, general manager. “We don’t hold up the process, and that trust comes straight from the top.”

strict boiler requirements led Florez to become a certified boiler operator—a credential required to run the boiler on-site.

"If you can't work safe, you can't work here—and that matters to everyone," Florez says.

That care and focus on the well-being of its employees extends beyond plant safety to trust and empowerment.

"Everybody here is empowered to do what they need to do to take care of the customer," says Rick Ferguson, general manager. "We don't hold up the process, and that trust comes straight from the top."

Employees describe the culture as family-oriented—reinforced through team bonding activities such as cookouts, birthday celebrations and daily collaboration across departments.

Stockroom, Service and the Final Mile

The stockroom is the hub for all new and existing accounts. It's where garments are chipped and bar-coded, emblems printed and name tags sewn before being sealed, scanned and released into production. Anything pulled from service is evaluated here—usable items return to circulation, while unusable garments are donated or discarded.

In nearby offices, customer service, service managers, accounts receivable, marketing and sales staff coordinate daily operations. Drivers prep handhelds and route materials before heading out. The company uses **Alliant Systems** (a division of Texo) software to power its operations.

Growing Without Losing its Identity

Ace ImageWear believes the Houston plant can nearly double throughput without expanding geographically—simply by maximizing efficiency in its current footprint.

"There's plenty of opportunity right here," Heilman says.

At its core, the strategy remains unchanged from the day Ace Linen Supply began in a Kansas City basement.

"My grandfather always said, 'Do business on a first-name basis,'" Heilman says. "That builds trust."

In an industry where scale sometimes threatens to overshadow relationships, Ace ImageWear continues to prove that consistency, focus and follow-through still matter—and that sometimes, the strongest operations are the quietest ones of all. **TS**



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