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What Happens To Old Hotel Linens? Westin Tests Turning Them Into Kids' Pajamas



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Courtesy of Westin Hotels & Resorts

Westin spent \$1 million testing a new program to turn its old linens into kids' pajamas.

Countless pounds of old hotel linens, which have to be pristine for guests, typically end up in landfills. [Westin Hotels & Resorts](#) recently completed a six-month test to transform its old linens – ripped or torn, but not soiled – into children’s pajamas. It collected 30,000 pounds of sheets, towels and bathrobes from 50 hotels and transformed the piles of unusable textiles that otherwise would have ended up in landfills into 2,000 pairs of pajamas, leaving just 3% of the material behind as waste.

It will donate 1,500 pairs of the PJs to children in need near its hotels in New York, Toronto, Mexico City and Cape Town with the help of [Delivering Good](#) beginning on April 16th, and sell the remaining stock in its own online store with 50% of proceeds going back into the upcycling initiative. Westin has spent just over \$1 million on the test to date.

Brian Povinelli, senior vice president and global brand leader for Westin Hotels & Resorts – a division of Marriott International – says the idea for the program came from a call to all employees for ideas about how the hotels could give back to their communities with corporate help about 18 months ago. The company received more than 325 suggestions. “The one that struck a chord was from a housekeeping supervisor at the Westin Trillium House in Canada, who brought us the insight that over the course of a year we have a lot of used linens,” Povinelli says. “They’ve finished their useful life, they are ripped or torn, and they cannot be put into use anymore. That particular hotel uses them for rags or donates them to shelters, but there are a lot going to waste.”

The amount of linens – including sheets, towels and bathrobes – that Westin’s 225 hotels, with 81,000 rooms, is mindboggling, though Povinelli says he can’t yet quantify the volume on a global basis. If the 50 hotels in the test are indicative of the total, though, Westin could easily generate more than 200,000 pounds of unusable linens a year. A set of linens typically lasts just a year or year and a half, he says, far less than consumers make their sheets or towels last.

Coming up with the concept was just the first step. “Once we had the idea, we were like, ‘Okay, how do we actually do it?’” Povinelli says. “It’s never been done before.”

Westin, like many hotels, already worked with an organization called [Clean the World](#), which for many years had collected the half-used bottles of soap and shampoos from thousands of hotels around the world and found new life for them in countries with high death rates due to pneumonia and cholera. So Westin turned to Clean the World for help.

Clean the World brought in Spartanburg, S.C.-based [Divergent Energy](#), which works with businesses to help them keep waste out of landfills by turning it into something that can produce revenue instead. Jim Gosnell, Divergent Energy’s president, says that the first step in turning linens into pajamas is to break down the existing materials into fibers that can then be turned into thread and rewoven. The difficulty is determining how far to break the pieces down to recover good-quality fiber. “It’s like baking. If you don’t have good materials, you don’t have a good enough end product, so 80% to 90% of the development was on that,” explains Gosnell, who

grew up in a family textile business. Companies that want to recycle their old textiles often break it down for insulation or acoustical uses, which is easier than creating yarn that can be rewoven into new clothes. “Growing up in the industry, I had a feeling of how you could overwork the material. You start shredding to the point of no return, and then you end up with dryer lint,” Gosnell says.