

## Chill out

*Susan Daywitt*

Don't let poorly maintained refrigeration spoil your profits

It's a sweltering Saturday in August, one of the busiest times of the year for your restaurant. Something doesn't sound right: Your cooler is silent. It has called it quits and didn't give two weeks notice, either. This was not in your best-laid plans.

When working optimally, refrigeration equipment helps you serve fresh, appealing food and drinks to your valued customers. Without it, you'd be serving lukewarm beverages, wilted greens and ice cream puddles. The problem is when refrigeration equipment breaks down, your business comes to a screeching halt.

You can lose thousands of dollars in wasted product and lost business in a very short period of time. Emergency repairs are costly enough; when they hit on a weekend, they come at a premium (and these sorts of things always happen on a weekend or holiday, right?).

Most breakdowns of commercial refrigeration equipment can be prevented with simple, regular maintenance. Is your preventive maintenance program up to the task?

It is not just the big failures that impact your bottom line. Day-to-day efficiencies, which come from keeping equipment running optimally, also affect profitability. According to Focus on Energy, Wisconsin's energy efficiency and renewable resource program, commercial refrigeration can account for as much as 50 percent of a restaurant's total energy bill. Maintaining your refrigeration equipment can potentially save between 5 and 10 percent on energy costs. That's worth giving your freezer some extra attention and tender loving care.

### Best Practices

There is no one correct way to manage preventive maintenance. However, whether you centralize management of the process across all your facilities or give individual locations autonomy over contracting for and performing services, there are some best practices and potential challenges to consider.

Becky Burton, Director of Facilities at Logan's Roadhouse, says educating your operations team is a constant process, especially with turnover in the field. Ultimately, the on-location team is responsible for ensuring services are performed fully, according to the terms of the contract (even when there is oversight and centralized process management). After all, they are physically present in the facility. It can be as basic as walking behind service vendors before sign-off and ensuring they do what they are supposed to.

Danny Koontz, Vice President and Director of Operations at VMC Facilities, spent many years at Ruby Tuesday's. He offers some simple, effective tips for ensuring proper service. For example, if you put paper in the duct a day before the cleaner comes, you have built-in quality control. If the service person moves the paper you know it was cleaned; if not, you have a red flag for follow-up.

Another useful practice is to always have the vendor bring the old filters to you so you know they have been changed. Have your site manager initial and date all filters so you know they are filters from your facility and not just a dirty "show-and-tell" filter.

Burton's team recently regionalized HVAC preventive maintenance (including refrigeration units on rooftops and condensing units for walk-ins) across 230 restaurants. Next up for her team: smaller refrigeration and cooler maintenance. With high-volume restaurants, the little things must be noted and addressed before they become big things. For instance, all discoloration must be investigated further, since it might be a sign of mold. Exhaust ducts and fans are the most likely places to find emerging mold. Areas that are out of eyesight may not always be cleaned, and that is where mold can grow.

In addition, ice build-up can be a sign of pending failure. This can happen if door seals begin to fail. This often occurs when employees leave doors of large units propped open for deliveries, which damages the integrity of the door, causing the seals to go bad.

When purchasing or replacing equipment, source as many items as possible from the same manufacturer to minimize service personnel, reduce costs and bolster opportunities to negotiate better warranty terms.

### Tracking and Documentation

With refrigeration units ranging from \$1,000 to \$30,000 or more, tracking the useful life and warranties of each facility's equipment is important. Koontz emphasizes that in addition to tracking models and serial numbers, you want to make sure equipment warranties begin on the day you open a restaurant, and not the date equipment was received. Like a car, the warranty should not begin until the item is used.

Burton explained that with the new Logan's Roadhouse centralized preventive maintenance program, regional vendors consolidate bills and Internal Audit reviews them for compliance with contract terms and conditions. Within the first quarter of implementing this centralized program, the process has already saved the company money by catching incorrectly priced invoices.

Good documentation will help with repair-or-replace decisions as well. Making an educated decision based on actual data far surpasses the alternative. Koontz explains that for equipment outside of warranty, he typically will choose to repair if the cost is less than 50 percent of the cost to replace. That said, this is where data on the repair history of that piece of equipment is important. You don't want to keep repairing a lemon or reward locations that abuse equipment by prematurely sending them new units.

Remember: Small things add up to large repairs. A regular preventive maintenance program for your refrigeration assets will save you money now and headaches later.

Susan V. Daywitt is the Founder and CEO of SLM – Facility Solutions Nationwide. She is active in organizations such as the Restaurant Facility Management Association, The Alternative Board, International Facility Management Association and the Women's Business Enterprise National Council.

#### Your Daily/Weekly Checklist

Even if you have a formal preventive maintenance program, regular maintenance will improve your equipment's longevity:

- Check temperature and defrost settings so food doesn't spoil and equipment doesn't work harder than necessary.
- Clear space around the equipment so air flow is maintained and equipment does not overheat or run inefficiently.
- Turn out lights in walk-in coolers and freezers so you don't drive up your electric bill or generate unnecessary heat, which forces the equipment to work harder than necessary.
- Clean the inside of units regularly with the proper products.
- Check for air leaks (hinges, latches, gaskets, seals) to ensure your equipment is airtight.