

‘Is it Hot in Here?’

Sal Brunetto

Prepare for summer now to avoid an A/C catastrophe

As restaurant professionals gear up for the high-traffic summer season, it's the facility managers who have the crucial role in keeping customers happy. One of the most important activities a restaurant facility manager can do before summer season kicks off is making sure the air conditioning systems are in top shape. An HVAC system failure during the hot weather months creates an extremely uncomfortable environment for guests, which could easily turn into a loss of revenue. Here's how to prepare for the summer season.

Schedule a Springtime Tune-Up

Just as you would get a mechanic to look at your car before hitting the hot asphalt for summer vacation, you need to get an expert to take a look at your commercial HVAC system. There are four vital steps you and/ or your contractor can do to ensure your restaurant stays cool:

- Check refrigerant charge. This can't be stressed enough. If your refrigerant level is 15 percent too high or too low, your unit will decrease in efficiency by 20 percent—a huge energy loss! Also, if it's not correct, your compressor (the heart of the system) can fail, requiring a very costly repair. A quick check by an HVAC professional can get the refrigerant back to the proper level.
- Clean outdoor coils While your HVAC expert is checking the refrigerant charge, ask them to clean the coils. If you don't get rid of the dirt, leaves and leftover gunk from the hard winter, your system will have to work harder and longer, which may eventually cause it to shut down.
- Change filters. This is a very easy and inexpensive task to do twice a year. You should change the filters before outside temperatures heat up in the spring and again when the temperatures start to drop during the fall.
- Check thermostats. With every season change, you should make it a habit to look at the restaurant's thermostats. Make sure the schedules are correct, including time and temperature settings. Your air conditioner should run when it's needed and turn off when the restaurant is closed.

Consider Dehumidification Solutions

If your dining room is too humid during the summer months, it's time to get a professional to check the air balance between the HVAC and exhaust hood. The conditioned air needs to match and balance the bad air going from the exhaust hood to the outdoors.

Recalibrating the air pressure will help eliminate high indoor humidity and keep your customers comfortable. Also, if you have an HVAC system that's eight to 10 years old, it might be a good time to invest in a system that has dehumidification technology. This gives you ultimate control of humidity levels inside your restaurant. Depending on the exact technology employed by the HVAC manufacturer, these solutions can deliver about 65-percent moisture removal in the dehumidification mode.

Look for New Technology to Save Energy and Money

HVAC systems consume nearly 30 percent of a restaurant's energy bill. If you have older equipment, you may want to consider upgrading to the latest commercial HVAC equipment with advanced technologies. Upgrading can lead to immediate savings on your bills—and these savings will be most significant during hot weather. Here are some of the innovations on the market today:

- Variable-speed technology. Some new commercial HVAC units include an innovation called variable-speed technology, which gives restaurants the ability to run the A/C system at a lower speed, known as first-stage operation. This is used when a restaurant needs airflow, but not necessarily a blast of cold air. Variable-speed technology reduces airflow by 50 percent during first-stage cooling and for fan-only operation.
- Heat recovery technology. Instead of the air conditioning unit using cold refrigerant to get rid of hot air from the building, heat recovery technology uses the rejected hot air to heat water. According to the EPA, nearly 20 percent of a restaurant's utility bill is for heating water, so using this application to essentially “pre-heat” water can provide

significant savings. In some cases, restaurants have seen savings of up to 50 percent on monthly water heating expenses.

A restaurant's HVAC system is extremely important in creating a pleasant environment for customers. By scheduling a tune-up, equipment will work better and last longer. Facility managers need to be proactive and figure out what type of system will not only save energy, but save money in the long run. The last thing a manager needs is to be scrambling around, desperate to repair and replace during the demanding summer months.

Sal Brunetto serves as Rheem Manufacturing Co.'s Corporate National Accounts Manager. He joined Rheem in 2008 and has substantial experience in the application of commercial HVAC equipment, boilers, standby generators and water heaters in restaurant environments.