

## When a Slow Drain Becomes a Big Issue

Beth Krantz

### Mitigating the impact of common restaurant plumbing problems

What's worse than an upset customer? A backed-up drain in the middle of the dining room floor. In many cases, a disgruntled customer can be satisfied with a complimentary meal, but that clogged drain can result in several upset customers, employees—and the health department, if it's not immediately cleaned up.

Because so much water is used in a restaurant, plumbing issues happen all the time. Yet, they are an issue that often falls low on a restaurant facility manager's priority list until there's an emergency situation. With the rising costs of water and plumbing services, you can benefit from understanding the types of plumbing issues common to the restaurant environment and ways to identify a qualified partner who can get the job done right—fast.

#### Snakes, Augers and Plungers, Oh My!

When it comes to plumbing emergencies, a variety of situations can occur in both the front and back of the house. Some will have minimal impact, and others can wreak havoc on an operation—even on a slow night. Here are a few common plumbing issues you may experience:

- Broken faucets: Whether it's in the kitchen or the restroom, a broken faucet not only frustrates users, but it can also quickly drive up water costs. From broken handles to a leak, broken faucets are a frequent issue in many restaurants, with indicators emerging well before an issue occurs.

- Hot water tank issues: Because many restaurants use high water temperatures for cooking and cleaning, hot water is key in a foodservice operation. So when a dishwasher can't effectively sanitize dishes or a patron isn't able to use warm water when washing their hands, it can disrupt service and can cause a negative impact on your brand.

- Toilet back-ups: Whether you manage a quick-service restaurant or fine dining establishment, no patron wants to see a clogged toilet. In fact, a recent survey revealed that 90 percent of restaurant patrons would consider a restroom to be dirty if they saw an un-flushed toilet. Quickly resolving backups will improve a user's perception of your bathrooms—and your brand.

- Clogged drains: Drains run throughout a typical restaurant layout, from janitorial closets to sinks in bar areas. Whether the drain is in the sink or in the floor, a clogged drain will immediately interrupt activities such as rinsing produce, cleaning dishes or washing hands. They can also result in backups that can spill onto the floor and cause additional hazards, such as slips and falls.

#### When Not Just Any Plumber Will Do

Whether you have a single restaurant or 500 restaurants spread across the country, finding a qualified plumber who can fix your issues quickly and correctly is a must. Not only will it limit downtime and potential sanitation issues, it can also enhance your customers' perception of your business and improve your overall bottom line. The key is to identify your partner before the issue becomes an emergency.

To find the right partner for your business, ask the following questions:

- What is your system for diagnosing repairs? Many plumbers will take a repair request and dispatch a person to fix the issue—without understanding the exact problem. This can result in a plumber having to make multiple trips to retrieve missing parts or equipment, increasing the cost of the repair.

Look for a partner who gathers as much information as possible about the issue up front so they can match the right plumber to the job. This also helps ensure the technician has the right tools and equipment available so it's repaired correctly the first time.

- What is your typical repair time? Because response time is critical when it comes to plumbing issues, you want someone who can be there fast. In addition, you'll also want to ask about the plumber's one-call resolution percentage. It's not about your negotiated cost per visit—if they don't resolve the issue on their first call, it can mean higher costs to your business.

- What is your geographic footprint? Do they have branches across the country, or do they work primarily through contractors? If contractor-based, how is the work and performance of each contractor monitored? An ideal provider will have a national footprint so you can trust that the same quality service is provided whether service is needed in Minneapolis or Johnson City, Tenn.

- What is your service provider's trade knowledge? A good partner will have trained experts on staff who understand the different types of plumbing technology used in restaurants. For example, whether you have a tankless water heater or a heat pump, you'll want someone who understands the different systems and can quickly repair issues with common scenarios. If your vendor contracts out repairs, you will also want to find out if they have processes in place to grade these vendors and reward those who provide exceptional service.

- What is your approach to customer communication? How do customers stay apprised of the job status? No restaurant operator has the time to ask about the status of a job—and they shouldn't have to. Work with a plumber who takes customer communication seriously and is in constant contact with you about the status of a repair. The plumber should provide an ongoing account of what they do and don't know. If there are any delays in the repair process, that person should call you with updates on expected delivery and completion dates.

#### Keeping the Lines Open

Ultimately, communication is key in any good partnership. If you have a plumber who doesn't respond quickly, charges you for unnecessary trips or just doesn't seem to have the right expertise for the job, maybe it's time to look for a new one.

When looking for a plumbing partner, be clear about your expectations and needs. What types of plumbing issues are most common in your restaurant? Are stores in certain parts of the country more prone to a particular issue than others? By setting clear expectations and thoroughly vetting the plumber at the outset of the relationship, you can help reduce the impact of a plumbing emergency.

#### Avoid Short-Term Problems with Long-Term Resolutions

Because plumbing issues are an all-too-often occurrence in restaurants, many operators implement preventive maintenance programs to reduce the opportunity for a backup or other common plumbing issue. This can also help reduce costs. For example, F. Greg Coker, a franchisee for Atlanta-based Huddle House, said he had to call a plumber every three to four weeks to take care of stopped-up kitchen drains. "In the first nine months of last year alone, I spent \$1,115 on plumbers to clean out our drains," he said.

From drain-line to grease trap maintenance solutions, there are a variety of different programs available to help make sure water continues to flow smoothly in your restaurant. Talk to your plumbing service provider to find out what options exist for your business.

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