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Change Language: Choose

One Size Doesn't Fit All
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Three myths of restaurant energy management

These days, companies are focused on green initiatives and energy conservation practices, and the restaurant industry is no different. Restaurants consume huge amounts of energy to serve their customers. However, before purchasing any energy management products or launching green strategies, restaurant operators should understand some of the misconceptions and myths regarding restaurant energy management.

Myth #1: The typical energy management systems and strategies leveraged in most commercial applications can be easily transferred into the restaurant industry.
When it comes to energy savings, restaurants present a greater challenge than other commercial applications. As a result, it is more difficult to identify realistic energy savings and deploy successful strategies to capture the savings.

One challenge is gaining significant savings from HVAC and lighting systems. Most restaurants have very little downtime, unlike other types of facilities where buildings systems can be set back or turned off overnight and on weekends. Another challenge is food preparation. High-energy-use appliances cannot simply be turned off carte blanche. Overcoming these challenges is possible, but it requires more thought and planning than merely setting back a thermostat or turning off some lights.

A restaurant operator cannot manage energy usage like in an office building, warehouse or retail store. Restaurants have unique requirements and a different set of priorities. It is wrong to assume that a control system designed for an office building is a good solution for a restaurant. Much of the energy savings in a restaurant must be gleaned in small percentages from a variety of areas, rather than in large chucks from a few areas. Restaurants require a system that monitors both functions and equipment allowing for more sophisticated control. Important features include ease of use, proper scheduling of temperature set points, exterior lighting control, good control of interior lighting and automated scenes, and building environment and equipment monitoring. The system should quietly do its job 24/7 while requiring little to no human attention and should alert the proper personnel when malfunctions occur. There should also be provisions for temporary override of settings that are simple and easy to access by restaurant management and staff. Primarily, the most important feature of a good restaurant energy management system is the ability to ensure customer comfort and help provide an enjoyable dining experience while saving energy.

Myth #2: Energy savings is a primary concern for all levels of management in the restaurant industry.
History shows that edicts for energy savings in large companies, including restaurants, typically come from upper management. Because restaurants use so much energy to conduct everyday business, it is only logical that those watching the bottom line would want to reduce costs. While other industries have little trouble with obtaining management buy-in to make energy savings a priority, this is more difficult in the restaurant business. Heavy-handed implementation of energy control systems by upper management and improper methodology of the control is a recipe for failure. Saving money by reducing energy use incorrectly can adversely affect the restaurants on a local level.

A restaurant manager's main goal and most time-consuming responsibility is making sure the customers are comfortable and happy. This laser focus can sometimes make energy savings seem like a lower priority. However, efforts to reduce energy use place additional responsibilities on the manager, and therefore can interfere with his or her ability to ensure customer satisfaction. Upper management must carefully choose energy management systems that enhance the restaurant manager's ability to serve the customer, or at the very least do not hinder their efforts.

Myth #3: Programmable thermostats and digital light controls are enough for energy management.
Many restaurant operators mistakenly believe they are employing energy management solutions by simply adding a few building controls. While they have automated some building features and may even save a few dollars on utility bills, they have not accomplished true energy management savings.

The key lies in solutions that evaluate the performance of equipment. In fact, a well-controlled and poorly performing building can be more expensive to operate than a poorly controlled and well-performing building. Investing in an energy management system that provides good control and monitors and reports on the health of the equipment will provide additional savings and benefits for the restaurant owner.

These systems also gather and compile data that is easy to read and understand. This data can also ensure the facility is operating efficiently. Some systems even generate alarms when equipment is functioning poorly, which may indicate an imminent failure. This helps facility operators address problems quickly and efficiently, before they become bigger and more expensive to solve. The data can also help identify areas where additional energy savings can be improved. With the right solutions, management can gain new insight into building operations.

Choosing an Energy Management Company
The first step to a restaurant energy project is to enlist the help of an energy management company with industry experience. Choose a professional who wants to partner with you to achieve your goals. Ask for proof of their experience in the restaurant industry and get as many references as possible. Stay away from anyone claiming to have a quick fix by offering a generic packaged system that they claim works on everything. Ask them how restaurant energy management differs from other industries. Be wary if they say there are no or few differences.

Achieving restaurant energy savings is not difficult, but designing and implementing the changes to capture these opportunities is often challenging. The important lesson to remember is that saving energy does not always translate into saving money and increasing profit if the process negatively impacts customers' experience. A restaurant that can keep the focus on both a high-quality customer experience and operating their building efficiently will win on two fronts.

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