

## Perfecting Preparedness

Kevin Smith

As restaurant facility managers know all too well, HVAC systems can easily consume a significant portion of a location's energy bill. Next to food, that can often be the largest expense your facilities encounter.

In this article, we will review the pros and cons of operating HVAC maintenance services in reactive and preventative programs so you can best evaluate which solution is best for you.

### Reactive Versus Proactive

While the primary advantage of a reactive HVAC service program is reduced short-term expenses, the long-term effects may prove as costly as three to five times that of a typical preventative program. The higher cost for a reactive repair is often the result of equipment replacement, unscheduled labor expenses and downtime. Restaurant equipment that's poorly maintained requires increased energy to function; whether the culprit is clogged filters, worn bearings or high-resistance connections, equipment inefficiency is costing you money.

Let's face it, even though there are numerous studies, programs and articles that tell us otherwise, in today's economy many retail facility organizations are operating in a reactive mode. Why is that? Lack of sufficient resources ranks highest in the reasons cited. No doubt the increased economic pressure of today's business world has created an environment of "Don't fix what isn't broken." However, a reactive approach to HVAC services eliminates the opportunity to identify and prevent more costly repairs during the lifecycle of your equipment.

Peak efficiency and a smoothly running HVAC system are at the top of the list in managing a facility's energy usage. A smoothly running HVAC system requires forward thinking and planning by its operators and owners. These both become sidelined when system maintenance is only considered an indirect expense.

Another component contributing to this approach is the fact that HVAC systems are not highly visible items like lighting, carpentry or general décor. HVAC systems are not thought about until something goes wrong—and when something does go wrong (which we all know will become a reality all too soon) — it's too late for maintenance to be done efficiently. Instead of standard, ongoing maintenance, you end up with costly and expensive reactive maintenance.

### the importance of service Agreements

To get the most benefit from your HVAC service program for your restaurants, it's best to set up a service agreement with your preferred vendor. A service agreement will generally include scheduled visits to maintain peak efficiency, as well as seasonal checkups that prepare your facility for the upcoming heating/cooling season in a proactive manner.

What types of services are performed during a typical service visit? They could include checking system functions and safety controls; adjustment of operating sequences; inspecting electrical components and connections; reviewing pumps, flow rates and lubrication; changing air filters and confirming optimum airflow; examining, aligning and adjusting belts as needed; and inspecting blowers.

Before your summer cooling season, a service visit may include the cleaning of coils, condensation pans, lines and traps, as well as checking refrigerant levels (and, if low, identifying leaks).

A fall service visit (leading into winter) may include cleaning the burner assembly, removing soot from the fireside of the burner, checking and cleaning the humidifier operation, inspecting the heat exchanger for cracks and adjusting the air/fuel ratio of burners.

### Plan and Prepare

By implementing a standard HVAC maintenance plan, you can reduce, or avoid altogether, costly emergency repairs. For HVAC equipment that is approaching the end of its lifecycle, the best bet is to plan ahead. You can expect to pay much higher repair/replacement costs if you have to repair or replace your HVAC system in the midst of a summer or winter season. During routine service visits, your HVAC vendor can make any necessary repairs to extend the life of your system or provide you with a heads up on the possibility of future replacement needs.

When an HVAC system is not operating properly, either in the cold winter or hot summer months, you can lose sales and customers.

The restaurant industry is challenging and competitive enough without having to be concerned about your customers comfort due to a difficult HVAC issue. Unplanned repair or replacement can greatly reduce your restaurant's profit.

Your HVAC service program will help you control the timing of your spending by planning out maintenance and upgrades. Setting a fixed monthly budget for your HVAC expenditures helps prevent unexpected maintenance and repair costs. Ongoing standard HVAC maintenance can also identify the best time to replace your existing equipment. By upgrading to high-efficiency equipment, you can recognize significantly reduced HVAC costs. Additionally, energy and green building rebates may be available with new high-efficiency HVAC equipment.

### Handling Refrigeration

Most restaurants have a diverse need for new and energy-efficient equipment with today's technology. A trusted HVAC vendor will offer their customers the most up-to-date equipment selections from a broad array of manufacturers. A qualified HVAC technician can service and install your equipment, handling all of the refrigeration, electrical and plumbing. Satisfied customers will discover and understand the ease of working with a turnkey provider for all of their mechanical services, equipment installations and energy-efficiency programs.

Refrigeration systems for restaurants should include:

- Multi-plex refrigeration systems
- Food preparation rooms
- Walk-in coolers
- Ice machines
- Store reach-ins or display cases

With HVAC costs absorbing up to one third of a restaurant's budget, a proactive maintenance approach to your HVAC system can result in substantial savings in heating and cooling costs. A reactive approach can lead to increased cost expenditures in comparison to a standard preventative HVAC service agreement.

Make sure to plan ahead if you have an HVAC system that is approaching the end of its life. By upgrading to a higher efficiency HVAC system, you can save a significant

percentage on your current energy costs, which can translate to true bottom line savings.