

Your Restroom, Your Reputation

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Learn how to take control of restroom environments and improve customers' experiences

It's no secret that unpleasant restaurant restrooms have the unwieldy power to gross out patrons and tarnish the image of the establishment. What may not be as obvious is the increasing occurrences of people experiencing unkempt restrooms, severely impacting the customer-business relationship.

New research shows that almost 70 percent of Americans reported experiencing unpleasant conditions in restrooms in 2015—a 20-percent increase since 2012. When asked the most important improvement they'd like to see in restrooms, survey respondents overwhelmingly said, "Clean them more regularly."

The fact is restrooms represent a powerhouse of customer perception and influence. And customers aren't the only stakeholders affected; employees, suppliers, media and restaurant business associates are also impacted. In the national survey conducted by Bradley Corp., a designer and manufacturer of commercial plumbing fixtures, 91 percent of respondents said that if they associate a business with a particularly high-quality product or service, they would expect the restrooms to also provide a high-quality experience. Almost as many believe the condition of workplace restrooms is an indicator of how a company values its workforce.

The majority of Americans also say that poor restroom conditions indicate poor management, lower their opinion of the company, show the business doesn't care about customers and make them think twice about patronizing the establishment in the future.

Clearly, a bad restroom damages customer-focused industries like restaurants. Lost customers and sales are poisonous to an industry that is highly dependent on repeat customers, a happy and engaged restaurant staff, and positive word-of-mouth buzz.

Germ Concerns in Restaurants

As part of the restroom-business equation, Americans identify restroom germs—and the prospect of touching them—as a major turnoff. This is especially true for restaurant facilities, which are the No. 1 type of facility in which people are most concerned about washing hands, according to the survey. Restaurants cultivate even more anxiety over hand washing and germs than healthcare facilities, which came in second place.

Adding to those concerns is industry research suggesting that germs may be unknowingly spread by sick employees, as reported by Safety+Health magazine. A survey of 1,200 workers who grow, process, distribute, cook or serve food showed that 51 percent reported that they always or frequently go to work despite being ill

—an eye-opening statistic and a big contrast to most managers who believe that only 18 percent of workers show up when sick.

No matter the type of public facility, people have a strong aversion to dirty surfaces and germs in restrooms, and they create maneuvers to avoid coming into contact with these areas. Bradley's survey shows that the most common way respondents avoid germs in restrooms is by operating the toilet flusher with their foot; 60 percent admit to this action. They also use a paper towel when touching the restroom door (56 percent), open and close doors with their hip (43 percent) and use their elbows to avoid touching surfaces (39 percent).

It turns out restroom users who avoid direct contact with restroom surfaces have a good reason. Scientists at the University of Colorado in Boulder examined the microbial biogeography of public restroom surfaces in 2011 and found 19 bacterial phyla invading these areas. Some bacteria were found on toilet seats and floors, but much bacterial exposure in public restrooms occurs during the hand-washing process. In fact, the exteriors of soap dispensers accumulated more bacteria than toilet seats.

Despite their sensitivity to germs in restrooms, Americans have no problem handling their cell phones in restroom stalls. Bradley's survey revealed the majority of respondents admit to texting, checking/ sending email, checking/posting on social media and surfing the web on their cell phones. Six percent admit they've taken a photo in the stall while 8 percent of men say they've checked their fantasy sports league. When you consider that London scientists have reported that one out of six cell phones tests positive for fecal matter, germ-adverse restroom users may be inadvertently spreading more restroom germs via their cell phones instead of avoiding them.

A Checklist for Cleaning Up

To start, giving employees proper training and guidance on restroom cleaning and maintenance is crucial. As part of the training, operators can give employees fact sheets with checklists of areas to inspect, clean, sanitize and restock. Special attention should be given to picking up garbage, keeping countertops, toilets and floors clean and dry, and using air fresheners to maintain a pleasant-smelling environment.

It's important to note that bad restroom scents are especially bad for business. Smell is connected with the brain's limbic system, an area closely associated with memory. According to the Sense of Smell Institute, smell has a very powerful link to memory, which in turn links to the emotional regions of the brain more directly than other senses, such as sight and touch. All the more reason to keep restrooms odor-free.

In addition to smell, the following consumer complaints should be noted by facility managers, according to the Bradley Corp. survey:

- Toilet paper dispenser is empty or jammed
- Partition doors don't latch closed
- Overall appearance is old, dirty or unkempt

- Soap dispenser is empty/jammed or doesn't dispense enough
- Towel dispenser is empty/jammed or doesn't dispense enough
- Water collecting on floor

'Cleaner' Building Materials

In addition to regular cleaning and maintenance, there are also new features of building materials and restroom products that can help enhance the condition of restrooms, simplify maintenance and prolong the lifecycle of restroom fixtures.

For example, countertops, basins and lavatory systems now frequently incorporate more sustainable materials, which are made of natural and recycled materials. Many are GREENGUARD-certified and can contribute to LEED credits. In addition to green benefits, sustainable materials can increase the durability, maintainability and life span of these products.

Newer sustainable materials for lavatory systems include a molded natural quartz material that can be sculpted into a range of design options. Natural quartz is virtually maintenance-free, since it does not require sealing, buffing or reconditioning like granite. Solid surfaces made of recycled materials and rapidly renewable material are also a popular sustainable choice. Solid surfaces resist stains, chemicals, scratches and heat, which reduce the likelihood of repairs and the need for replacements. Both natural quartz and solid surfaces use integrated bowl designs, which eliminate crevices for microbes to hide, are easy to clean and help prevent the spread of germs. These materials also have nonporous properties, helping them to stay cleaner and germ-free longer.

Durable recycled materials are also used in solid plastic toilet partitions made from recycled high-density polyethylene (HDPE) solid plastic. Constructed from 1-inch thick plastic containing at least 30 percent pre-consumer recycled HDPE and up to 100 percent postconsumer recycled plastic, this solid plastic material stands up to heavy usage and graffiti attempts, and is easy to clean and maintain.

In addition, selections for touch-free hand dryers, lowflow toilets with sensed flushers, contemporary stainless-steel accessories—and even appealing lighting and paint color—will optimize cleanliness and maintenance, while elevating the aesthetics of the washroom environment. Over the lifecycle of these high-performance fixtures and materials, these quality products will lower operating costs due to less cleaning and fewer replacements.

Touch-Free Fixtures

Enhance Cleanliness

There is a continued preference among consumers and building owners for touchless fixtures in restrooms. These fixtures can help users in their quest to avoid touching restroom surfaces, reduce the transmission of germs and bacteria from users' hands, and improve overall hygiene as users leave the restroom area and enter other parts of the building.

Touchless fixtures are user friendly and convenient for consumers, and easier for staff to keep in good working condition. The “handsfree” design reduces wear and tear usage and helps discourage vandalism attempts, such as leaving a faucet running to create a mess in the restroom. Sensored faucets and automated soap and towel dispensers prevent waste and overflows with an automatic shut off.

In addition, high-efficiency touchless hand dryers are also a smart choice for eliminating paper towel waste, which often ends up on the floor, and eliminating the added expenses of towel replacements and time for restocking and garbage pick-up.

Impacts of Good Restroom Karma

Frequent and thorough cleaning, as well as using durable and innovative building materials and technologies, help ensure that restrooms look their best and operate more efficiently and effectively—something restaurant patrons, employees and other stakeholders appreciate.

Since today’s high-quality restroom fixtures minimize time and costs for installation, maintenance, repairs and replacement parts, building staff can focus on other duties and projects. In addition, these newer products are expected to last upwards of 20 years—twice as long as older products. That increased lifespan promotes operational savings over time.

Perhaps the most important payback is delivering a more inviting and comfortable environment that enhances the consumer experience, encourages hand washing and demonstrates a restaurant’s commitment to customers’ safety, health and well-being.

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