

Facility Horror Stories

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Lessons to learn from restaurant plumbing nightmares

In the restaurant business, any plumbing problem can be catastrophic. Issues can easily escalate from headache to horror story in the blink of an eye. Surprisingly enough, most plumbers put restaurant kitchen sinks at the top of their "worst jobs" list, surpassing even the complicated sewage lines.

Let's review some plumbing nightmare scenarios and what you can learn from them in order to avoid dilemmas and lost revenue.

The Case of the Relentless Sink

Danny Koontz, Director of Facilities Management for Collier Restaurant Group, shared a putrid tale of an old bathroom that was converted to a new office.

The odor was an issue and grew stronger even after multiple attempts to resolve the problem. The smell would occasionally drift to the front of the house, which prompted complaints from guests. A plumber made several visits to the site, sealing up everything he could possibly find. Since no building plans were available from the previous concept, it became a costly guessing game.

Diagnostics included running a camera through the lines, smoke testing and checking all the grease traps. Every time they believed they had resolved the issue, the smell would reappear. Koontz contacted a larger maintenance company for a second opinion. They found an unsealed pipe in a corner, as well as a spot overhead that needed to be repaired. While the situation improved, occasionally the odor was still causing an issue.

One day, the plumber was on site and noticed the smell. The root of the issue turned out to be a studor vent, which was in the wall that separated the men's and women's restrooms. The vent had failed and was allowing the rancid smell out. After tearing the wall apart and removing the failed unit, the odor was finally ousted for good.

Mysterious Backups

Koontz also described an instance in which the floor drains in a mechanical room continuously backed up. A plumber investigated the water heaters, water softener and other factors that could be causing the issue, but could not determine where the water was coming from.

The mechanical room drains were emergency drains that were used for the fire suppression system as well as the boilers and filtration. It took another level of diagnostics, which included running a camera down the drain, to discover that during the conversion, the drain was not connected underneath the slab. This resulted in the constant back-up of water. After locating the

area of the drain that was not connected, the plumber had to break up the floor in the kitchen to reattach the plumbing, which solved the issue.

Ravenous Drains

At one of his previous companies, one of Koontz's restaurants was flooded after hours by the restaurant above. The staff of the restaurant located on the second floor hosed down the floor each night, causing leaks in the ceiling of the restaurant directly below. Management made a surprise visit to the second-floor restaurant one evening at close to discover that all drain covers were removed and all kinds of debris was trapped in the drains, causing backups.

The mall landlord who owned both restaurants required all lessees to use the mall's contracted plumber for any work. Every time the floor leaked and damaged the space below, the first-floor restaurant was forced to close and bill for lost revenue.

The problem was eventually resolved when the plumber installed a set of pans between the floor of the second-floor restaurant and the ceiling of the restaurant below. Arrangements were made with a mall employee to check and empty the pans until a more permanent solution was in place. This temporary resolution was far more cost-effective than the constant closing of the restaurant below and billing for lost sales.

Monster Grease Clogs

John Mattus of Hahn's Septic has experienced some of the most severe plumbing nightmares restaurants face. He often witnesses grease clogs so relentless that you could walk on the water lines. Animal fats and grease (FOG) combined with calcium and ash in pipes can create a type of soap so dense that all the hot water in the world won't dissolve it. The only solution is mechanical removal.

Mattus said he has seen situations where a simple grease backup turns into a flooded restaurant, overflowed parking lots and costly environmental spills. Any spill greater than 5 gallons constitutes an environmental hazard. It requires the Department of Environmental Conservation involvement and is costly both in cleanup and in associated fines. Even a small restaurant can experience hefty fines; Mattus recalled a low-scale restaurant backing up into an adjacent intersection, plugging up lines for a half-mile radius, closing the street and facing upward of \$ 10,000 in fines—not including the cost of cleaning.

The moral of the story is keep your grease traps and lines clean.

Diagnosing Problems

Common plumbing issues occur as a result of improper installation, equipment failure or bad management practices. For example, cracked lines and backups can develop from not having a proper amount of fall in the pipe. In addition, negative air pressure inside the building is essential to keep from drawing air from the sewer system. Grease traps must be properly sized, installed and maintained.

The goal is to catch problems early before they become time consuming and costly. If you happen to hear your drain gurgling or making any noise out of the ordinary, this is a warning sign that something may be wrong. Mattus explained that pipes search for air; if the air exchange needed for water to flow is not available, it becomes a soft clog. Soft clogs build up and can turn into hard clogs. Deal with the issue at the first signs of trouble; don't wait for it to magically fix itself, because it won't.

Good Operational Practices

If common sense were a common practice, a good amount of plumbing emergencies could be avoided. Granted, in the hustle and bustle of daily service, things can be overlooked. That being said, enforcing behavioral standards for your staff is crucial to the health of your plumbing systems.

Tom Ferrero of Franc Environmental said he is often amazed by the things pulled out of drains: silverware, cups, saucers and other items that get swept into a floor drain. Proper housekeeping by staff members is crucial to keeping your establishment's plumbing running smoothly at all times.

Every shift must include at least one person who is familiar with how to deal with a running toilet tank, dripping faucet or simple clog. In addition, everyone should be aware of where the main water shut-off valve is located.

Preventive Maintenance Is an Investment

Everyone wants to keep costs down. This is a good outlook to have from a business perspective, but it's not ideal when it comes to staying constant with preventive maintenance. Performing regular preventive maintenance can halt a larger issue right in its tracks, saving you money in costly emergency plumbing services.

There is no cost-saving substitute for regular servicing. That includes:

- Cleaning grease traps at proper intervals based on volume and type of cuisine prepared at your establishment
- Proper grating over all floor drains
- Draining and jetting lines as needed; at least once a calendar year
- Ensuring right-size traps and interceptors for your facility
- Performing regular inspection and cleaning of drains and lines to ensure drain socks and lines are clean and clear

Maintaining healthy professional relationships with plumbing inspectors is one of the most important things any restaurateur can do to keep his or her business open and up to par with local codes. These government employees are often given the power to override city mandates at their discretion. However, your relationship with inspectors should not be adversarial— far from

it. Embrace the fact that they are there to serve the environment and community, just as you are there to serve your patrons.

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Lesson Learned From The Trenches

Learn the codes and regulations for your area to ensure your facility is compliant 100 percent of the time.

Fostering good relationships with your vendors and inspectors is vital to the longevity of your business.

For any type of facility conversion, always attempt to obtain building plans from the previous tenant or building owner.

Two eyes are better than one. Consider having two vendors work together on tough issues.

Sometimes you must work around operations personnel to find a solution.

Identify problems early to ensure they do not progress into something detrimental and costly.

Second-floor restaurants exponentially increase the risks and costs associated with plumbing problems. Avoid expanding into one if possible.