

Running Hot & Cold

Matt Lind

Understanding your kitchen equipment and what it takes to make them last

Behind the curtain of every restaurant and food-service operation lies the essential components of food/beverage storage and preparation: the kitchen equipment. Although these lowly appliances often get taken for granted, the all-too-familiar sight of an unlit burner pilot or recognizable chatter of a failed freezer compressor will strike fear into the hearts of the most experienced facility managers and owners. However, even the most disastrous catastrophes can often be avoided with just a few simple steps—and a change in the traditional way of thinking about your most crucial assets.

Large and small, hot and cold and everything in between, kitchen and food-service equipment comes in boundless shapes, sizes, uses and purposes. From small counter-top griddles to massive pizza ovens, from under counter refrigerators to walk-in freezers the size of grade school classrooms, one aspect certainly unites this equipment: They will eventually break down and require repair or replacement.

Every day across the country, untimely kitchen equipment breakdowns result in unplanned facility shutdowns, spoiled product, costly repairs, lost revenue and low customer confidence. The heavy reliance on your kitchen equipment does not mean that you need to be crippled by the ever-present shadow of inevitable breakdown and failure. Simply understanding the importance of kitchen equipment preventive maintenance and implementing a plan may be the missing piece to reducing or eliminating these costly and unplanned surprises.

Rethinking Preventive Maintenance

Traditionally, preventive maintenance was offered almost exclusively in the automotive and HVAC industries, primarily due to a proven link between maintenance, performance and life expectancy. But recently, other industries are beginning to realize this correlation holds true for their most important assets, specifically in the food and hospitality industries.

"We are now beginning to discuss the potential of implementing preventive maintenance on our kitchen equipment," said Brian Davies, Facilities Manager at Border Foods. "People have a general understanding that changing the oil in their car results in longer engine life, but restaurant owners and managers will often take a wait-and-hope approach toward their most valuable assets."

Davies' sentiment seems to be gaining traction throughout the food industry.

"We are seeing more and more facility managers and owners who want to implement these preventive measures to ensure their cook lines and cold storage systems are running effectively, efficiently, and they can be counted on for longer periods of time," said Aaron Swanson, Sales Specialist at Legend Facility Services. "It truly is an industry-wide shift from being reactive to proactive."

So, what does a typical food-service equipment maintenance agreement usually entail? Here are some of the most important items to take into account when considering a maintenance agreement.

Hot Side

- Regular cleaning of all heating tubes and elements in gas-fired heating appliances (ovens, broilers, fryers, ranges, etc.) prevents soot buildup. Soot can decrease efficiency and could release carbon monoxide.
- Pilots and burners should be cleaned and calibrated to prevent flame rollout, which will burn wires and cause general safety issues.
- Water holding tanks, such as steamers or boilers, should be cleaned and have the water level probes and sensors adjusted.
- Knobs, thermometers and digital components should be calibrated and checked for wear.

Cold Side

- Cooler and freezer condensing (outdoor) units should be kept clean and free of debris, which reduces the cooling efficiency and ability. Additionally, compressor contactors and wiring should be checked for early signs of wear, and refrigeration sight glasses should be inspected for good refrigeration quality and flow.
- All condenser fan motors should be inspected for rotation and operation.
- Evaporator (indoor) fan motors should be checked for proper operation or signs of wear and tear.
- Condensation drain pans and pipes should be checked for clarity to eliminate clogging and overflows.
- Cooler and freezer door gaskets and door alignment should be inspected to ensure proper insulation and prevent heat infiltration.
- Ice machines are notorious harbingers of mold and bacteria, yet often go unchecked. Bins should be regularly emptied and sanitized to prevent mold and bacteria growth. Water lines and filters should also be checked and replaced as required. Additionally, the ice machine compressor should be thoroughly inspected for proper operation, and ice thickness should be tested and calibrated to the desired size.

Go Pro

Every kitchen and food-service facility is different and will ultimately require different maintenance tasks. To ensure maintenance is being done properly and on a regular basis, rely on a qualified service technician or licensed professional. Finding a contractor or service provider you trust is vital, as the maintenance process sometimes uncovers deficient parts or equipment. Although proactive identification may save you from having failures at the worst possible times, these repairs and replacements can still sting your wallet. Trusting your maintenance partner to quickly identify potential issues and provide timely and budget-minded solutions will prove key to reducing the overall impact on your business.

Becoming familiar with the equipment in your kitchen and understanding the correlation between proper maintenance, reliability and life expectancy can be the difference between untimely and impactful failures and having a system that can be counted on for the long haul. As we all know, the food-service and hospitality business is full of unforeseen pitfalls and surprises. With the implementation of a maintenance program and a partnership with a qualified service and maintenance provider, the most crucial components of your kitchen will be running longer, safer and more efficiently.

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