

Fire On All Cylinders

Brianne Rechy

A complete fire prevention and response guide

What is the No.1 thing a restaurant sells? Most people would probably say, "Well, food, of course." I would argue that it is something else entirely.

When I'm considering where to dine, I take the entire experience into consideration: host and wait staff friendliness, restaurant cleanliness, food, ambiance and more. Food is just one factor in my decision process, although it is admittedly perhaps the strongest factor.

What isn't normally in my consideration is Are safety. That's an assumption most diners make. They assume the restaurant's facility personnel has completed their maintenance checklist to ensure a safe experience. Is that a good assumption to make? Are the restaurant employees truly prepared? To validate this assumption, Are prevention must be weaved into every restaurant facility manager's maintenance checklist.

The Power of Fire

To give some perspective, consider that an estimated 5,900 restaurant building Fires occur annually in the United States, resulting in an estimated average of 75 injuries and \$172 million in property loss. Additionally, the U.S. Fire Administration reported that Fires originating in restaurants accounted for the most reported incidents in their category. The damages caused by these Fires averages about \$23,000 per Fire event.

The facility team plays a big role in everyone's wellbeing, and Fire safety needs to be top of mind for facility managers so guests can keep it at the bottom of theirs. We have put together a few tips that will help keep your guests and teams out of harm's way.

Fire Prevention

We'll start with fire prevention. As you might guess, cooking is the leading cause (64 percent) of all restaurant fires, according to the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Here are several tips that will help prevent fires in your restaurants' kitchens:

- Train employees on proper cooking techniques. This is by far the best fire prevention step you can take. The good news is you can implement it immediately. Be sure your employees know the proper equipment settings, food preparation and cleaning techniques to keep your kitchen a safe place to work every day. Even when everything seems to be working well, never leave cooking equipment unattended.

- Create multi-faceted training and maintenance programs for fuel-and gas-powered equipment. First and foremost, each employee in the kitchen who will be handling the equipment should be fully trained on how the equipment works and how to use it properly. This process includes everything from turning it on in the morning, to usage through out the day, to shutting it down each night, and even how and when to clean it. Additionally, communicate with a service professional to schedule regular equipment inspections to verify that the equipment is working as intended.
- Remember to look up. The hood vent system is often overlooked for scheduled cleaning, but it's an important piece of regular kitchen maintenance. With frequent use in a restaurant, build-up can clog the venting system, creating an unsafe environment in the kitchen. Be sure to schedule a professional for regular cleanings, at least twice each year.
- Coach your team on the proper heating and electrical usage levels through out the restaurant, and monitor them regularly. If usage in either category is elevated, identify the source immediately and initiate repairs to prevent potential damage.
- Educate the team on proper product storage. Many products require specific storage temperatures and can combust in the wrong environment due to flammability. Be sure your team is aware of where everything must go.

Fire Response

Now that we've covered the basics of fire prevention, let's shift gears to fire response. Sometimes fires happen, even when all of the rules are followed. In the event a fire occurs, you want to give your staff the ability to minimize danger and damage as much as possible:

Install and inspect fire alarms. Sometimes, this is the first sign that something is wrong, and you want restaurant employees to have the maximum amount of time possible to respond by either extinguishing the fire or helping to evacuate the building.

Classify the fire. Different fire categories require different responses. According to FEMA, fire categories include:

Class A: Ordinary combustibles such as wood, paper, cloth, trash and plastics

Class B: Flammable liquids such as gasoline, petroleum oil and paint, and flammable gases such as propane and butane

Class C: Energized electrical equipment such as motors, transformers and appliances

Class D: Combustible metals such as potassium, sodium, aluminum and magnesium

Class K: Cooking oils and greases such as animal fats and vegetable fats

Pair the fire and the extinguisher. There are eight main types of fire extinguishers to respond to varying fires: water and foam, carbon dioxide, dry chemical, wet chemical, clean agent, dry powder, water mist and cartridge-operated dry chemical.

Research what makes sense for your restaurant, and have the right products easily accessible by everyone.

Train your team on proper fire extinguisher usage, as routine as it might seem. In a time of panic, muscle memory can be key in accurately executing the safety plan. Just remember to P.A.S.S.: Pull the pin, Aim at the base of the fire, Squeeze the handle and Sweep from side to side.

Install and inspect a fire suppression system and fire sprinklers to help retard or put out fires that have grown to a dangerous size. Both systems automatically activate upon contact with flames to extinguish fires without human interaction. This allows your team to exit the building safely while the system works to put out or maintain the fire until the fire department arrives.

Clearly mark all emergency exits. The safest thing to do in the event of a major fire is to exit the building. Without clearly identifiable and properly illuminated signage, employees and guests may have a difficult time exiting the building as quickly as possible, particularly if the main entrance is no longer an option. Practice exiting the building a couple of times a year with your employees through different exits so everyone is intimately familiar with all options and to ensure all exits are clear for a quick getaway.

Internalize the tips above, and create a plan of action around them that works for your team. Not only could this training, maintenance and inspection plan prevent fire-driven business disruption that could cost the company money, it could also save lives. Help your guests celebrate their birthdays, reunite with friends and just plain enjoy their food in their blissfully unaware state of being.

Brianne Rechy is the Director of Business Development at Dwyer Service Solutions (DSS), a national solution for HVAC, glass, electrical, plumbing, restoration and landscaping needs.