

Repairs & Maintenance

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Finding a Good Handyperson

You want someone willing to sweat the small stuff

Whether you own one restaurant or 1,000 locations, you do not want to hire just anyone. Just like an employee or contractor, a handyperson has access to your restaurant facility. The right one is more than just someone with a toolbox. It's a company with whom you may build a long-term, trusting relationship.

Whether they are fixing an electrical outlet or hanging a chandelier or painting, you want to know it will be done right, safely, cost-effectively and with minimal disruption to operations.

You want a contractor who will notice things before they happen. Rarely does something go wrong on its own accord. There are always telltale signs that indicate a problem is about to happen. The perceptive eye of a handyperson can notice this. By solving problems before they escalate, you can save your business headaches and budget.

Securing a handyperson program for your restaurant is more complex than hiring someone for a one-off residential project. Here are the top areas that require special attention for restaurant facility managers.

Insurance Requirements

Unless you are running a small, single-location, privately owned restaurant, the insurance requirements almost always push the small handyperson companies out of the running. Peter Popoff, Director of Facilities at Eureka! Restaurant Group, shared that finding a good handyperson company is challenging because the high insurance requirements make it hard to find an affordable contractor. For example, the typical insurance requirements for restaurants are \$1 million with a \$2 million umbrella. Depending on lease/landlord requirements, it is not uncommon for a \$5 million umbrella to be necessary. Needless to say, most small handyperson companies do not carry that level of insurance, and the volume of work doesn't warrant the operating cost of acquiring such insurance.

"You must always look to protect the company, the brand and its customers," Popoff said. "You can't afford the risk of insufficient insurance." In other words, don't put your company at risk by short-changing this requirement.

After all, imagine what would happen to liability, publicity and safety if a handyperson was to install some ceiling lighting and it fell during the dinner rush. This may be exciting in a movie scene, but it's definitely not something you want to have happen on your watch.

Competitive Pricing

Because insurance requirements often compell facility managers to hire larger handyperson companies, competitive pricing that doesn't blow the budget can be hard to come by. The days of paying \$40-50 an hour for the local fix-it person are over. Managing your expenses so that fixing doorknobs and painting touch-ups doesn't eat up too much of the repairs and maintenance (R&M) budget can be a challenge. Building it into the budget can depend on how you build/renovate a location from the start. If you skimp on quality in the initial build because of time or financial constraints, your R&M budget can increase exponentially. Whereas a well-built facility that spared no expense on the initial build might have a 1 percent R&M budget, another less thorough build could find you looking at a 5 percent R&M budget or more.

In addition to the outright cost of the job, the efforts of billing and managing a paper trail can be cumbersome if you need to use a lot of different vendors. This increases overall administrative costs, even if they don't directly hit the R&M budget. Consolidating handyperson services into a centralized program under one umbrella company that sources local vendors for you can help mitigate this while offering you a single point of contact. Even if you have one primary vendor and a few secondary vendors for specific needs, it still cuts down on overhead cost and headaches for any brands with more than a half-dozen locations.

Skills and Coverage

No single company can be good at everything. It is important in the evaluation process to understand what trades they are strong at and which they are not. Do they excel at electrical and painting but fall short at plumbing? These are things you want to know. Through references, word of mouth and an honest conversation with the vendor, you need to find out. Start the relationship out slow and build on it. Consider a few service calls for the facility, and then evaluate:

- How did they communicate?
- How good was their follow-up process?
- What was the level of service quality?
- How well did they work with the facility's on-site staff?

From this, you can determine if you need a primary and secondary vendor list to cover all needed trades at an acceptable level of quality.

How well does a company cover the regions you need service in? While some companies might say they have nationwide coverage, that doesn't mean that coverage is good everywhere. Dig deeper with the vendor and industry peers to get the real scoop on the coverage they can actually deliver.

Ideally, as you build a relationship with a new vendor, they will be upfront with what they can really deliver. But don't take their word for it. For instance, if a vendor says they cover all of Florida, perhaps most of their work is in Tampa/St.Petersburg, so you could be hung out to dry in Miami. Avoid this pitfall by doing two things:

- Ask the vendor for references within the area of your restaurant and contact them for an honest assessment of coverage and availability.
- Connect with your industry peers via professional forums, such as RFMA, to ask them directly about their experience with a vendor.

When evaluating a particular vendor, get clarity on who will actually be performing the work. Do the employees work for the contracted company? Or, do they subcontract out all or some of the work? A facility manager needs to know who to expect when a call is made to avoid confusion, poor communication and any unclear ownership of responsibility. The best handyperson programs and relationships are built by having the same workers show up each time that work is needed. This builds the relationship with the store manager and make for more efficient, cost-effective and confident working relationships over time.

"Vendors are a reflection of me," Popoff, said. "I want to set the vendor and facility up for success."

Customer Service, Follow Up and Coordination

For large-scale facilities with many locations, coordination is critical. General managers of a restaurant typically have a certain authorization authority, say \$1,000, followed by regional managers at a higher level. The highest-level jobs require a facilities director's approval.

Customer service and follow up should be stellar at every job level. Coordination and the ability of the handyperson to work with all levels of management are important to ensure brand consistency. With so many moving pieces, you want a vendor who can communicate well and who is proactive and responsible if mistakes are made. How a company handles a misstep is as important as how they shine when everything goes well, because mistakes will happen.

The bottom line is you want vendors who stand behind and guarantee their work and are accountable for their time on the job, all while fitting in your budget.

Don't discount the little things when it comes to evaluating a handyperson. When they come to your facility, casually walk out and check out their truck. Is everything neat, or is it a trash pile of cigarette butts and candy wrappers? Consider these good clues as to the type of job they'll do.

In the long run, keeping your facility ship-shape will enhance customer experience and nip in the bud any problems that escalate from inadequate maintenance.

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Questions to Ask Before Hiring a Handyperson

The next time you are in need of hiring handyperson services, use this cheat sheet as your guide.

1. What level of insurance do you carry/are you willing to carry?
2. In what trades does your company specialize?
3. What are your skills? What types of jobs do you typically do?
4. What regions do you cover?
5. How do you handle mistakes?
6. What type of documentation do you provide for the repairs?
- 7 How do charge for your services? By the hour? Project? Retainer?
8. What is your availability/typical wait time to come out for a repair?
9. Do you warranty your work? If so, for how long?
10. When finished, will you haul away trash and old materials?
11. Do you have references from similar-size facilities? May I call them?