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The Blame Game

Angela Hughes

Vendor fingerprinting highlights the importance of grease trap service audits

Being a facility manager involves knowing something about a lot of different things. Angela Hughes admits that when she started working at Pizza Hut as a facility manager, she didn't focus much on grease traps or grease trap services.

"I saw it as a necessary evil; something that we did to comply with local city code requirements," she said. "It wasn't something I knew anything about; in fact, it was pretty much at the bottom of my need-to-know list. "

Hughes is now a Facilities Manager for Darden Restaurants, specifically Red Lobster, but in this article, she shares some personal experiences and valuable lessons about how she learned the importance of grease trap service audits.

Grease Traps and Plumbing Lines

During my first few years at Pizza Hut, I developed a strong relationship with my local plumbers, and soon realized just how wrong I was to place the importance of grease traps on the bottom of my priority list. The plumbers taught me that the frequency of plumbing calls and overall repair and maintenance costs can actually increase when a restaurant has poor grease trap service, such as un-serviced or improperly cleaned traps as required by code.

Then my grease trap service vendor informed me that plumbers will often blame the grease trap service vendor when issues arise, saying the trap needs to be pumped, instead of solving the stoppage issue themselves. That comment immediately got my attention. Ultimately, I changed grease trap service vendors because my previous vendor was either pumping traps too much or not staying on schedule—there was no consistency. Basically, the two vendors were pointing fingers at each other.

Ideally, the two vendors will work together to ensure the restaurant's lines are free flowing and the trap is pumped on a regular schedule. When the grease trap service provider and drain cleaning company are not coordinated in their service schedules, there can be unnecessary finger pointing when problems occur. I learned the best time to pump grease traps is immediately after the lines are jetted, which pushes the accumulated grease and debris from the inlet lines into the traps.

In addition, for recurring stoppage, the drain cleaning company should provide a video camera inspection of the line to identify the cause and offer alternatives to resolve the recurring backup. Some drain cleaning companies, at no additional charge, will even take pictures of the grease trap and provide the video camera inspection after the service is completed to validate that the trap and lines were properly cleaned.

When the finger pointing began, I decided it was time to perform an audit of our grease trap services. My first action was to determine the outlier restaurant locations that needed to be audited.

Digging Deeper

I started looking a bit deeper into the situation by performing the following actions:

- Identify other chronic outlier locations. I pulled detailed financial reports for repairs and maintenance spending to identify possible plumbing stoppage outliers. Chronic stoppages and grease traps are often related, even when the chronic stoppages are due to failed sewer lines or grease traps. Despite managing 110 locations, it was easy to sort out the possible stoppage calls because I had negotiated a flat rate for weekday and after-hours' service

with all of my plumbers for stoppage calls. Therefore, the prices were the same across the board. After identifying my eight to 10 chronic outlier locations, I proceeded to the next step.

- Determine actual service dates. The next step involved determining when each of the traps was serviced so I could effectively audit services. Our facilities department had a list of restaurant locations and trap sizes; however, there was no report compiled that showed actual service dates per location and when the next service was scheduled. I needed this information in order to determine if my grease traps were actually being serviced on time.
- Create a monthly service tracker. I called my grease trap service rep and asked for the creation of that report to be emailed on a monthly basis. This Grease Trap Service Report became my handy field reference guide and a helpful tool overall.
- Create a condition report. The third step was to determine the condition of my grease traps in the market. I called my grease trap vendor again and asked them to create a monthly trap conditions report that summarizes feedback from the actual field service agents by location. We found that the service techs were often reporting issues with our grease traps, such as grease traps with holes in the bottom, issues with damaged/missing trap lids and missing interior baffles on their service logs. Unfortunately, that's where it stopped in most cases. There was no process for communicating this valuable information to our facilities department on a regular basis. This monthly grease trap condition report is an excellent capital planning tool and has also helped with resolving issues more quickly. This is especially important for issues that are also safety hazards. In addition, the vendor uses this report as a management tool.

Time To Schedule The Audits

Now, I was ready to schedule my first grease trap audits. After comparing my list of outliers to the service dates on the Grease Trap Service Report, I chose three or four locations that had been serviced within a few days to a week prior. I contacted my grease trap vendor to schedule my first grease trap service audits. A week later, a field service manager, my account rep and a service truck met me at the first location. We scheduled four audit stops for that morning in the same city to maximize everyone's time.

Our first meeting proved to be an eye-opener for everyone involved. Here's what I learned from that first grease trap audit:

- The vendor doesn't always perform field audits of their own techs. A good service vendor will commit to auditing a percentage of their grease traps each month (10 to 15 percent is the average). However, completion of audits is not always tracked very well and thus the vendor fails to hold supervisors accountable for the audits. The vendors must follow up with their own employees to truly provide the best service.
- Missed or late services. When a grease trap service is missed or performed after the due date, regardless of the reason, it is often the restaurant that will suffer. This can create issues with city officials and may even result in fines.
- Grease traps are not always serviced thoroughly. The contract requires that the trap must be pumped dry. The technician is also supposed to scrape/clean the trap and power wash the walls, the inlet and outlet for the trap, as well as remove this debris. The audits will help determine if these tasks are properly completed. Using a Sludge Judge when auditing traps will help to determine if excess solids remain in the trap after it was serviced. Again, this is also why vendor field audits are so important.
- Not all grease trap service trucks have jetting ability. This was a huge eye-opener for me and my vendor. The wrong trucks were being used, which was the reason some of my traps were not as clean as they should be. Many smaller service trucks do not have jetting capability. Grease trap service routes are normally scheduled by due dates and area to enable a variety of customers to maximize the stops for the drivers. When my vendor realized this was the cause of the quality issue, they quickly changed the way their service trucks were dispatched. During the next audit, approximately one month later, this issue was resolved.

What Else Did I Learn?

Plumbers also have opportunities for improvement. If your grease traps pass the audits, the next step is to audit the plumber and determine the reason there were so many stoppage issues. Many times, this involves calling another plumber for a second opinion or contacting the owner of your plumbing service company.

Grease and debris in the lines are the main causes of restaurant drain line blockages. Typically, a high-pressure water jetting service can help clear the lines by penetrating and emulsifying the grease and flushing out the system. Cable machines merely bore holes through the grease and sludge, but they won't clean and push the debris out of the lines the way jetting will. Clean pipes mean fewer service calls.

If the lines are jetted and the grease traps are pumped on a regular schedule but recurring blockages still happen, the problem could be line abuse or damage. Check past service reports for comments regarding possible

indications of line damage. Managers are often reluctant to fix a line problem due to the expense and possible down time for the restaurant. An audit would not be complete without a video camera inspection to pinpoint any line damage, such as offset joints, punctured lines, broken pipes, bellied lines or root infiltration.

Also, I found that restaurant employees cause some of the problems. Abuse occurs when solid products, such as straws, utensils, plastic items, paper goods or sponges, are allowed to enter the system. Since all waste line and floor drain inlets should have strainers to block such items, only the physical removal of the strainers would allow these types of products to enter the system. Check past service tickets for comments regarding this type of problem.

Also, if the recycle containers for cooking oil are not being utilized and employees are pouring waste cooking oil directly into a floor drain, this will be very evident when you pull the lid off the trap during the audit. You will see a layer of grease/oil floating on the top of the trap. I encountered this at two of my locations during my first year of audits.

It also became apparent that having a quality service vendor reduces cost overall. Using a vendor who complies with all state/local regulations and responds to your service needs with the ability to provide reporting is essential.

How often should you audit grease trap service? Initially, I scheduled three rounds of audits to cover my dozen or so initial plumbing outliers. Later I scheduled a random audit at least once per year. By auditing both plumbers and grease trap vendors while I was with Pizza Hut, my R&M plumbing costs were reduced that first year by more than 20 percent. My plumbing costs continued to be lower than other markets, and I had a lot of older restaurants.

Grease trap service is a regional partnership between the facility manager and the service vendor. It is important to understand not only our side of this important service, but also the challenges and requirements placed on the service vendor.

The Vendor Perspective

If the customer, the plumber and the grease trap service provider work as partners to establish a drain maintenance program, you'll have a win-win strategy. Due to the complexity of ordinances, compliance requirements and safety hazards that are inherent to grease trap services, it is important that every liquid waste generator understands and audits their current provider's scope of work and their safety and compliance policies.

Safety Is Important

The recent tragedy surrounding the death of a 3-year-old who fell into a grease trap behind a supermarket and restaurant in Vineland, N.J., spotlights the necessity for a significant focus on grease trap safety. Operational safety should be a core focus of your grease trap service provider—they must ensure the safety of your customers, your team members and the community.

A safe grease trap service provider must not only focus on safe driving, but also on safe operations while on your property. While at your location, your provider should use safety cones around the trap and service area; they should never leave a trap unattended, and they must properly replace all grease trap lids after service is completed.

It is also important for the local provider to report any issues with broken, missing or improperly fitting outside grease trap lids.

What Is Included In The Audit Process?

Every facility manager should have a grease trap auditing process that includes the following:

Safety

Compliance to local and state regulation

Trap inspection

Customer service satisfaction

Manifest retention

In many areas, it is common to partially evacuate a grease trap, but as stated earlier, partial evacuation can lead to an increase in costs and drain emergencies. Additionally, partial evacuation is illegal in many states. Standard policy should be to completely evacuate, power wash and/or scrape the trap at each and every service.

Understanding your grease trap service provider's method for disposal and disposal site locations is also important. The grease generator is responsible for the waste they generate from beginning to end, and they can be held accountable for any improper or illegal disposal of that waste by their service provider. Additionally, you should choose a trusted grease trap provider that will work in compliance with all ordinances and can manage compliance for you. Ordinances change from one municipality to the next. This responsibility falls under the

vendor— not the facility or general managers— with a guarantee that ensures your compliance and payment of possible fines.

Communication Is Important

This partnership should also include an open line of communication and responsiveness to specific customer needs. The monthly reports have significantly improved the frequency and quality of communication with YUM! Complying with the audit requirements and the regular information exchanges ensure that the service provider will adhere to the service scope, safety and compliance standards set by YUM! and provides safe, reliable and consistent service nationwide.

Overall, it is important for the service provider and facility manager to check and double check in order to provide the highest-quality service possible and to ensure safety for your restaurants and guests. Working closely to provide quality services will create and solidify a long-term relationship that will benefit the facility manager, the service provider and the restaurants that are supported by this important service.

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