



## Facilitator — October/November 2012



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### Starving the Hunger of Fire

Gordon Bruner

Taking a few minutes to inspect and review fire-safety measures will save thousands on fire-damage costs

Something a fire inspector told me has stuck with me for a very long time. He said, "Fire is hungry, and it is going to feed off of whatever it can find."

According to the U.S. Fire Administration, nearly 6,000 restaurant fires occur in the United States annually, accounting for approximately \$172 million in property damage.<sup>3</sup>

In a restaurant, there are a number of opportunities for a fire to break out. While you can take some steps to minimize the amount of damage that can occur, it is just not possible to eliminate all risk from the equation. Open flames on burners and in the grilling area are a staple of the kitchen. What you can do, however, is take some very simple precautions to minimize the amount of risk and preserve the safety of your staff and guests.

A good way to reduce the possibility of a fire is, to take a few minutes to review the systems you have in place to recognize and control possible fires. Inspect the areas where fires most commonly occur, making sure every precaution is being taken to eliminate the possibility of an incident.

Your management staff should continually monitor several key areas within your restaurant. While some tasks might seem simplistic or obvious, this is intended to serve as a cursory guide so that any member of your staff can take a few minutes, review the checklist, and protect your facility from a fire that can cripple your operation.

#### Fire Extinguishers

Keeping fire extinguishers in your restaurant is required to meet government compliance regulations. At least one of the extinguishers must be Class K: the approved extinguisher for commercial kitchens. Each extinguisher has an inspection tag that must be signed and dated monthly as the unit is inspected. Similarly, every extinguisher must go through a thorough maintenance review.

Make sure all fire extinguishers are easily accessible and placed strategically throughout the facility. Be sure you have the correct number of units relative to the size of your restaurant and that all of them are consistently reviewed to confirm they are in working order. Make sure their seals are intact, double check that the extinguishers are properly mounted and replace any units that are missing or inadequate. Already, you are going a long way toward protecting your investment.

It is also extremely important that you take the time to train all of your employees on proper safety procedures and the correct way to operate a fire extinguisher. Taking a few minutes to train your staff on how to react to a fire can be the difference between a vigorous cleaning and a major structural repair or replacement.

#### Fire Alarms and Smoke/Heat Detectors

Fire alarms and smoke detectors are one of the first lines of defense where fire is concerned, right behind an informed and attentive staff. Alarms and detectors play a very important role in keeping your staff, customers and structure safe, as they draw immediate attention to potential issues.

It is very important that these units are tested at least once a year and are working properly. The system must be certified by the local fire marshal and should be reviewed on a regular basis to make sure it meets the current standards.

### Sprinkler Systems

The sprinkler system must be inspected at least twice a year by a professional contractor. The water control valves, air and water pressure, and sprinkler heads need to be inspected regularly to make sure there is no damage or other issues that will inhibit the system's performance.

The sprinkler heads are one of the most critical points of interest when inspecting the system. Even if the rest of the system is performing at optimal levels, it can be rendered useless if there is even a minor problem with any of the sprinkler heads.

All of the sprinkler heads should have an 18-inch minimum clearance so they can operate at peak levels. A metal guard should protect any sprinkler head that is located in an area that might make it vulnerable to damage. Finally, any object that might obstruct the flow of water from the sprinkler head should be removed. The last thing you would want to discover is that a fire was not efficiently contained due to a box that was stored too close to one of your sprinkler heads.

### Hood Vents and Ductwork

Regardless of the menu items prepared in your kitchen, the hood vents and ductwork above the grill and fry area are key points of interest. The grease that will accumulate in these hoods poses a serious fire hazard that, if neglected, can easily set your facility on fire. Frequent cleaning of the hood and exhaust vents will improve the airflow to the kitchen, reduce the likelihood of a kitchen fire, and help to keep the building well within the fire codes, providing a safe and pleasant experience for your employees and guests.

The hoods above the cooking units should be cleaned daily by members of the kitchen staff. In addition, attention must be paid to the walls, work surfaces, vents and filters in the immediate area, removing any grease build-up that may have accumulated during the day. The grill surfaces should be cleaned daily as well, as food particles and grease that builds up will easily catch fire if not removed.

Having the hood units and ductwork cleaned in accordance with the fire and safety codes by a certified professional is essential to further reducing the risk of fire. A thorough yearly cleaning of the hoods and ductwork will take care of the grease accumulation that might have gone unnoticed, as well as any residue that might have collected higher up in the ventilation system. Do spot checks on your own to make sure they are being thoroughly maintained and that there is not a need to increase the service frequency.

As the ventilation system in your facility continues to work during your peak operating hours, there is ample opportunity for grease particles to become lodged in the ductwork. Especially during your busier operating hours, heat can build up within these ducts, raise the temperature of the grease particles and possibly result in a very dangerous fire. A fire within the ductwork system will quickly spread throughout your facility and cause major damage.

### Flammable Items

There are a great number of flammable items in any restaurant. From the wide variety of cleaning supplies and chemicals, to the extensive supply of dry or paper goods primarily used in front-of-house operations, there is no shortage of material that can fuel a mere spark into some major damage. All dry goods and chemicals must be properly stored to reduce the risk of these items catching fire.

One of the most common mistakes you will find in a restaurant is the random storage of flammable items. Storage space is often at a premium in a restaurant, but it is more important to recognize the importance of protecting the restaurant and staff over that of convenient storage space. One such area is where the gas/electric hot-water heater is stored. These units are usually situated in a room or closet, which unfortunately is a common place to store cleaning supplies. The nature of the water-heating unit poses a huge risk, so make sure the area is completely secure and clear of any chemicals.

Any flammable liquids, such as degreasers or any standard cleaning fluid, should be properly labeled and stored in a secure area away from a source of heat or flames. Similarly, cleaning supplies that are contained in aerosol form need to be stored in the same manner. The introduction of a chemical accelerant to a flame can allow it to spread and consume an area in seconds. Storing such chemicals in an outside locked storage unit is the safest means to avoid accidents.

While it is becoming less common for restaurant owners to handle their own landscaping, some independent restaurants still do their own lawn care. This adds another threat of chemicals being stored onsite, as gasoline for mowers, trimmers and power washers is introduced to the formula, creating another risk factor. Be absolutely certain that any such chemical is securely stored outside of the building and poses no risk of being ignited.

While your first thought concerning flammable items in your restaurant might be the various chemicals and dry goods, there are other factors that might go unnoticed. Consider your staff. The uniforms your servers, expo staff and cooks wear can very easily catch fire in the wrong situation. Pay specific attention to the clothes worn

by the kitchen staff. Are there loose strings or fibers hanging from their shirts or pants? It is very important that you enforce a strict dress-code policy, especially in the kitchen.

Similarly, the various towels and cloths that are used to clean the front and back of the house can prove to be extremely flammable. Make sure that towels are stored in a safe place and properly discarded. Remember that towels are exposed to cleaning chemicals, making them just as combustible as the chemicals themselves. Train your staff on proper disposal of used or dirty cloths and towels. Sometimes taking the simplest things for granted can result in a major issue.

#### Restaurant Lighting and Artifacts

Neon lighting has become more prominent in restaurants, especially in major chain locations. Before 1990, these lights would often be found to be the cause of fire. However, in the later 90s, policies that required all power supplies for neon lights to incorporate safety features were enacted to protect against the risk of shock or fire.

However, it is still important to maintain these lights. Take a few minutes to police the entire facility, stopping at each neon fixture to make sure there is no faulty wiring apparent. It is a good idea to clean these fixtures on a weekly basis to keep them clear of dust and debris. While the manufacturers are putting in their own protective "fail-safes," it does not hurt to take a look at them every three months or so to make sure they are functioning properly. In addition, when a neon light in your restaurant begins to show signs of malfunction, unplug the unit immediately, and take steps to have it repaired or replaced.

#### The Perimeter

A large percentage of household fires in the United States originate from an accident involving smoking. While recent laws have banned smoking in restaurants that permit access to individuals under the age of 21, a great many of them have set up designated smoking areas outside and around the perimeter of the building. Make sure this area is constantly monitored and well maintained.

You might notice from time to time that the "smoker's stands," commonly used for discarding cigarette butts, are melted and even severely burned. By maintaining these stands and having a staff member police the area periodically, you can significantly reduce the chances of fire.

While a designated smoking area is a deterrent for issues concerning fires on the outside of your building, it is by no means the extent to which you will need to go to keep the outside of your building safe. Take a look at your landscaping. Have you incorporated mulch into your outward design? There are very few substances in a restaurant scenario that are as combustible as mulch. In the right conditions, piles of mulch can catch fire on their own, with no spark or flame introduced. This increases the need to police the grounds thoroughly, watching for signs of smoke or even stray cigarette butts that may find their way to a bed of mulch. Pea gravel is increasing in popularity as an alternative to mulch. It is safer, requires less maintenance and, in the long run, costs less than mulch, as it does not need to be replaced as frequently.

In the end, it all comes down to common sense. By simply taking a few minutes to examine the various safeguards set in place to protect your restaurant against fire damage, and reviewing the high-risk areas to make sure they are clear of accelerants, you can dramatically decrease your chances of suffering extensive damages due to fire.

The importance of reviewing your current systems becomes much more apparent when you consider that in 2011 there were nearly 192,000 restaurant fires in the United States. That means that one out of every 32 restaurants filed an insurance claim for fire damage in 2011, at an average of \$28,667 per claim. That does not take into consideration the lost time and revenue that resulted from the damage. That puts a lot of things into perspective, including the value those few minutes can have in the long run.

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