The importance of restaurant hygiene to your bottom line

By Richard Slawsky, contributing writer for Fast Casual magazine.
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A popular restaurant chain in Vernon Hills, Illinois, shut down on July 1, 2003, following a salmonella outbreak that affected more than 300 people. The restaurant remained closed for 10 days following the outbreak.

In the wake of the closure, managers and food-preparation workers at the restaurant were required to attend lectures on proper food-handling techniques. The restaurant was forced to hire a private contractor to clean and sanitize the entire building before the health department allowed it to reopen.

The health department later determined that one of the primary causes of the outbreak was the failure of employees to follow proper handwashing procedures.

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Lake County, where the incident occurred, billed the restaurants’ parent company $32,000 for expenses tied to the vast amount of testing required to deal with the outbreak. Dozens of affected patrons sued the company, which settled the cases for an undisclosed amount.

The restaurant closed its doors for good less than a year later. The chain declined to comment on whether the closure was related to the salmonella outbreak.

Even if your operation never faces the nightmare of what occurred at the restaurant in Vernon Hills, the perception of an unsanitary operation can destroy your business. If your customers develop the impression that your restaurant isn’t clean and sanitary, you’re unlikely to ever shake that perception.

“Assuring good hygiene in a restaurant is a job and a half,” says Chef Angelo Morinelli, owner of Cucina D’Angelo in Boca Raton, Florida. “With the quality of the employees out there today it is important to do constant training.”

Start with the staff

Implementing good hygiene practices involves teaching the staff on a daily basis, says Tom Bianco, chief executive officer of Atlanta-based restaurant consulting firm Centripetal Management and a former executive chef at Romano’s Macaroni Grill, another Brinker International concept.

“If you have lineups with your wait staff every morning, talk about hygiene,” he says.

“When I was at Macaroni Grill, one of the things we would talk about every morning was clean aprons,” he says. “We don’t want you to use an apron that you used last night, we want a nice clean apron that looks good and looks professional.”

LATHER UP! Always wash hands, cutting boards, dishes, and utensils with hot, soapy water after they come in contact with raw meat, poultry, and seafood.
When you start addressing those things up front and make it part of your daily practice, it builds pride among the staff, Bianco says. Then, if there is someone there who is not up to snuff, the other members of the staff will usually take care of that person.

Dining room employees are often the face of the restaurant, and it’s critical to make sure those employees practice good hygiene, Chef Angelo says. If a front-of-the-house employee has the sniffles or even has a cut on his or her hand, Chef Angelo gives them a few days off until they are recovered.

Adhering to such standards means he’s occasionally required to fill a position himself, he says.

“If a busboy isn’t here, I put on an apron and clean tables myself,” he says. “That gives me a chance to talk to the customers.”

It’s also important to teach employees to wash their hands every time they touch a trash can, pick up something off the floor or use the washroom, Bianco says. Handwashing is doubly important if the employees use the same washroom as customers.

“If you’re in the washroom and you see an employee leave without washing their hands, it makes you wonder if you really want to eat there,” he says. “It’s a reflection on your business.”

Good hygiene practices are critical whether the operation is a funky pizza joint or a fine-dining establishment, Bianco says. The cleanliness of the staff and whether they carry any offensive odors are really important.

“There are obvious dives that people love to go to that have some unusual-looking wait staff with tattoos, piercings and all that, and that’s fine,” Bianco says. “However, smelling offensive is not too different from being offensive, and if an employee is offensive, it doesn’t create a cohesive working environment”. One of Bianco’s pet peeves, he says, is employees who wear excessive perfume.

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“Eating is a sensory experience,” Bianco says. “You eat with your eyes, you eat with your nose, and the ambiance of a restaurant creates a feeling of enjoyment. If you have something that detracts from that like overbearing perfume, it is going to give someone a negative connotation about your operation.”

Sometimes, however, an employee just doesn’t get the message, no matter how strong the hints. In that case, Bianco says, it’s time to pull that employee aside for a private talk.

“It is a very touchy subject,” he says. “But when someone just doesn’t get it, you are eventually going to have to approach that person and let them know there’s a problem.”
Keeping It Clean: When should employees wash their hands?

Employees should wash their hands after any potential contamination, such as handling food; using the washroom; touching their hair or clothing; sneezing or coughing; eating, drinking or smoking; taking out the trash; or busing tables.

How long should it take to effectively wash your hands?

Effective hand-washing takes 20 seconds, or about the time it takes to sing two choruses of “Happy Birthday.”

What is the proper hand-washing technique?

Use warm water to moisten hands. Apply soap. Rub hands briskly using the following process:

- Left palm on right backhand
- Right palm on left backhand
- Left claw in right palm
- Right claw in left palm
- Interlock fingers — agitate while interlocked
- Scrub forearms near wrists
- Rinse
- Towel dry thoroughly

What are some resources to remind employees to wash their hands?

The National Restaurant Association offers labels that remind employees to “Wash Hands Before Handling Food.”

Source: National Restaurant Association

Make a pit stop

In foodservice facilities, the cleanliness of the washrooms ranks high on the list of factors that form patrons’ opinions of their overall experiences. According to the National Restaurant Association, washroom cleanliness ranked second (only to overall cleanliness) in their expectations of fast food restaurants.

Clean, well-stocked washrooms and napkin dispensers show your patrons that you care about their well-being and overall experience.

“There are restaurants where the washrooms are always clean, they always smell good and there is never water on the floor,” Bianco said. “If they take that kind of pride in the hygiene of the washrooms, it is a good indication that they are going to take that kind of pride in the food and in the quality of the product.”

On the other hand, he says, if a customer goes into a restaurant where the washrooms are disgusting, that customer tends to view those washrooms as an indicator of how things are run. If the operator isn’t willing to take the time to clean the bathrooms, customers will wonder what else the operator is slacking on.

Even if the operator is meticulous about cleanliness, however, there are some often-missed factors that they need to be aware of. Although a washroom may appear clean on the surface, on a microscopic level it may be swarming with germs.

Operators striving for good hygiene should consider equipping their washrooms with towel dispensers rather than hot-air hand dryers. A washroom equipped with hand dryers tends to be much less hygienic than one equipped with a towel dispenser, says Tom Cummings, director of strategic accounts for Neenah, Wisconsin-based SCA Tissue North America.
“You are taking the air in a less-than-pleasant environment and blowing it on your hands,” Cummings said. “While those dryers all have a filter in them, in most cases if you were to ask somebody where the filter is and when the last time it was changed, their eyes would glaze over.”

Studies show that hot air dryers can increase the bacteria counts on your hands up to 500 percent, Cummings said. Also, studies show that the amount of time required to properly dry your hands is longer than most people use them, and damp hands spread a thousand times more germs than dry hands.

Modern towel-dispensing systems are designed to promote hygiene. Paper towels are covered and maintained within the dispenser for protection from the environment, and the touch-free design of many modern dispensers allows users to only touch the paper they need, not any common surfaces such as cranks or levers.

Most towel-dispensing units have smooth surface covers with rounded edges designed to prevent the build up of germs or dirt and wipe down easily. Units can be wiped down with a variety of common cleaners for routine maintenance.

According to SCA research, using a clean, dry, paper towel to dry your hands removes up to 99.9 percent of the germs from your hands.

Towel dispensers can help head off lawsuits as well, Cummings said.

“In a busy washroom equipped with a hand dryer, you tend to get a puddle of water underneath the dryer unit,” Cummings said. “That creates a tremendous potential for someone to slip and fall.”

Food poisoning FAQ: What is Salmonella?
Salmonella are microscopic living creatures that pass from the feces of people or animals to other people or other animals. Two types, Salmonella Enteritidis and Salmonella Typhimurium, are the most common in the United States and account for half of all human infections.

What is salmonellosis?
Salmonellosis is an infection caused by the bacteria Salmonella. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, salmonellosis causes an estimated 1.4 million cases of foodborne illness and more than 500 deaths annually in the United States.

What are the symptoms of salmonellosis?
Most people experience diarrhea, abdominal cramps, and fever within 8 to 72 hours after the contaminated food was eaten. Additional symptoms may be chills, headache, nausea, and vomiting. Symptoms usually disappear within 4 to 7 days. Salmonella infections can be life-threatening for infants and young children, pregnant women and their unborn babies, and older adults, as well as people with weakened immune systems.

How do people get salmonellosis?
Salmonella is usually transmitted to humans by eating foods contaminated with animal feces. Salmonella present on raw meat and poultry could survive if the product is not cooked to a safe minimum internal temperature. Salmonella can also
cause salmonellosis through cross-contamination, such as when juices from raw meat or poultry come in contact with ready-to-eat foods such as salads.

What foods are most likely to make people sick?
Any raw food of animal origin, such as meat, poultry, milk and dairy products, eggs, seafood, and some fruits and vegetables may carry Salmonella bacteria. The bacteria can survive to cause illness if meat, poultry, and egg products are not cooked to a safe minimum internal temperature and fruits and vegetables are not thoroughly washed. The bacteria can also contaminate other foods that come in contact with raw meat and poultry.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Tighten up the back of the house
One of the main areas for concern for restaurant operators as far as the kitchen goes is cross contamination. Cross contamination of food happens when harmful microorganisms from a raw food such as meat or vegetables is transferred to a ready-to-eat food such as salad or sandwiches.

Because ready-to-eat foods won’t be cooked any further, cross contamination can lead to a salmonella outbreak.

“In other words, if you were to take a chunk of raw meat or fish or chicken, cut it on a cutting board, then you put down a sandwich on top of that same board, the liquid from the meat or whatever is now on the sandwich,” says Mike Maler, vice president of Deli Lane Café and Tavern, which operates restaurants in South Miami and Brickell, Florida.

It’s important to make sure employees are using gloves or tongs to avoid touching food with bare hands, and to ensure they change gloves every time they handle a different food product, Maler says. It’s also important to sanitize knives and cutting boards as they go along, he says.

One of the main areas for concern for restaurant operators as far as the kitchen goes is cross contamination.

“You can go to the opposite extreme and use too much bleach or too much sanitizer, so you end up putting people at risk based on that,” Maler says. “It goes both ways, but the biggest concern is cross contamination.”

Operators need to pay close attention to the food that is coming in the restaurant as well, Chef Angelo says, and to keep raw items such as meat, fish or chicken separated.

“I check everything as it comes in the door,” he says. When I put food away, I put meat on one side of the cooler and fish on the other to avoid cross contamination.”

Maler’s restaurants use a third-party training company to conduct classes every few months to teach employees proper hygiene and safe food-handling techniques.

“You have to stay on top of it every second,” Maler says. “It helps us to have an outside source conduct training because we have an outside set of eyes looking in.”

**SeAL IT!** To prevent juices from raw meat, poultry, or seafood from dripping onto other foods in the refrigerator, place these raw foods in sealed containers or plastic bags.
On top of that, the managers at Deli Lane attend a more intense set of training classes that delve more deeply into cleanliness and hygiene, Malesays. In Florida, as in many other states, the health department requires restaurants to have someone on duty at all times who is certified in proper food-handling practices.

“It takes a lot of effort to run any business, and the food service business is extra-difficult,” Maler says. “You constantly have things to worry about, from the weather to the refrigeration, to making sure the food coming in the door is correct and making sure it hits the plate properly.”

If an operator isn’t attentive to good hygiene, that tends to indicate he or she isn’t attentive in other areas, Maler says. Ultimately, that inattention leads to lost customers and lost profits.

“I don’t think any customers would want to go to an establishment that has a reputation for being dirty or being lax on hygiene,” Maler says. “That could kill a restaurant once that word gets out.”

MARINATING MANDATE! Sauce that is used to marinate raw meat, poultry, or seafood should not be used on cooked foods, unless it is boiled before applying.

Source: International Food Safety Council