

# The Impact of Restaurant Hygiene on Customer Loyalty

*Turn walk-in customers into sit-down regulars*

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Restaurant owners may need to maintain attention not only on the food they offer, but the cleanliness of their establishment to improve the bottom line. Whether providing food on-the-go or a sit-down meal, research shows that the cleanliness of a restaurant, including the restroom, is an integral part of a customer's dining experience and ultimately, their loyalty to a foodservice establishment.

## The Power of Cleanliness

We've all had at least one horrible restaurant experience that ruined an appetite and left us not only fleeing the premises, but with a negative impression that cannot be erased.

Customers are forming an opinion and taking in their surroundings the

minute they walk into an establishment. One area of a restaurant proves to be especially important in the eyes of customers - the restroom. According to surveys commissioned by SCA and conducted online by Harris Interactive, 74 percent of adults<sup>1</sup> equate restroom cleanliness with that of the restaurant's kitchen, and almost a third of American adults<sup>2</sup> would not return to a location with an unsanitary washroom.



## Doing the Math

In some cases, customers are willing to alert staff to sub-par conditions, with 75 percent of American adults indicating they would be at least somewhat likely to complain to the manager or an employee of a public facility if it seemed unclean. However, of the remaining 25 percent, half would not address the situation at all, while the other half would share their feelings with others<sup>1</sup>. This negative word of mouth can have severe consequences on the success of a business, especially since 46 percent of restaurant goers<sup>2</sup> would avoid an establishment based solely on comments from their friends or family.

To put this data in perspective, if a business serves 200 customers a day:

- Sixty-seven of these patrons would not return to the establishment if they found it to be unsanitary
- Fifty would choose not to alert management, but would tell others

Hypothetically, if these unhappy patrons tell two people, the business ends up losing 50 potential customers a day. It makes better business sense to either hire additional staff or implement new dispenser solutions that require less frequent refills to remedy the situation and keep the facility looking and smelling clean and well-stocked. Especially at peak business times, employees should be dedicated to routinely checking the restrooms to ensure the counters are wiped down, the floors are free of trash, and the dispensers are well stocked with soap and paper products.

## Everyone's a Critic

With today's ever-growing world of social media, word of mouth travels fast. According to the National Restaurant Association's (NRA) 2011 *Restaurant Industry Forecast*, three in four online adults in the U.S. now use social tools to connect with each other, and social media savvy customers are more active in the restaurant community and dine out more frequently than the general public<sup>3</sup>. As a result it's now even more critical for restaurants to ensure a positive experience for customers. With customers having the ability to share opinions and reviews with the click of a button, word of mouth is taken to the next level for online users. While restaurant patrons may find social media valuable in selecting a dining establishment, a recent survey revealed that 43 percent of restaurateurs thought Yelp was actually hurting restaurants<sup>4</sup>. It's true that negative reviews can be harmful to the reputation of a restaurant, but managers and owners can also use them as valuable insight into what makes customers unhappy. Some businesses even choose to engage with unhappy customers to see if their personal experience can be improved. Providing a free meal or sincere apology can go a long way in the eyes of a customer and others who see management's willingness to make amends.

## The Health Inspection

Restaurant owners and managers are often expected to be jacks of all trades. Their responsibilities range from marketing to production to serving, and often involve working long and hectic hours. On top of this, negative reviews often fall on their shoulders.

Making the grade now literally is added pressure for NYC restaurants, where the city health department requires restaurants to post their most recent inspection “grade” in a visible area. Would your patrons choose to walk into a “B” or “C” restaurant over an “A”? Even if the grade is being appealed or there is a request for re-inspection, the regulation requires the current grade be posted until further inspection takes place, even if the problems have been addressed.

Scheduled and surprise inspections take time and resources away from normal restaurant operations, but are important hygiene requirements. Inspectors notice odors – if the restaurant smells unsanitary, it probably is. Health inspectors will also ensure foods are the appropriate temperature, refrigerated and stored properly. Sanitizing solutions should be changed frequently and all restaurants should refer to local health department regulations on the necessary concentrations for these solutions.

The day-in-the-life of a restaurant owner or manager can be chaotic. Hygiene mishaps as a result, however, can be detrimental. Adherence to the state food codes is essential to preventing foodborne illnesses. The newly revised CDC estimates state that each year roughly 1 in 6 Americans (or 48 million people) gets sick, 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases. The CDC also reports that 36 percent of documented outbreaks are tied back to poor food handling<sup>5</sup>.

**\$75,000**  
The average cost of a  
foodborne illness outbreak to  
an establishment.

## Bottom Line Consequences

Lack of proper hygiene can also affect your operation’s bottom line. Employees may become ill if they do not wash their hands properly after handling raw meats or fresh produce or after using the restroom. This can result in time lost to missed work and time spent documenting the incidents. A more severe consequence of employee illness and unsanitary practices is that they can result in outbreaks of foodborne illnesses that risk the health of patrons. The NRA has estimated that the average cost of a foodborne illness outbreak to an establishment is about \$75,000. In addition, lawsuits against these restaurants have ranged from \$150,000 to nearly \$5 million<sup>6</sup>. Beyond the financial issue, a foodborne illness incident can damage a restaurant’s reputation – it may be difficult to recover from this negative publicity.

While education and training are essential, there are other factors to consider that impact restaurant hygiene and safe food preparation, such as these identified by Food Workers and Managers which include<sup>7</sup>:

- Time pressure due to high volumes of patrons and staffing issues
- The structural environment of the institution including equipment and resources
- Whether the restaurant has defined procedures in place which state the negative consequences of non-compliance with these required practices
- Whether disposable gloves and hand sanitizers are made available

Creating an environment focused not only on health and wellness but on people and the planet is essential to the success of a restaurant business.

### Educate Kitchen Staff on Proper Hand Hygiene

Hand hygiene plays a key role in keeping customers and employees healthy and happy. The FDA found that food workers washed their hands in only a third of the instances in which they should have washed them.<sup>8</sup> Proper hand hygiene can reduce the risk of foodborne illness 25 percent and offers a 25-50 percent reduction in absenteeism<sup>9</sup>.



Educate kitchen staff on food safety and hand hygiene often - more than once a year. Make it mandatory but also make it fun. Display the protocol for proper handwashing at each sink in the kitchen and in the restrooms. If there is not a handwashing station handy, put up a hand sanitizer dispenser. The NRA's ServSafe<sup>®</sup> offers great resources during National Food Safety Month (NFSEM) at <http://www.servsafe.com/nfsem/>, and throughout the year at <http://www.servsafe.com/>.

Keep these important messages in front of staff by disseminating information regularly in training sessions, employee newsletters and on bulletin boards. Also, display information in key areas of the building, such as bathrooms and break rooms or wherever your employees gather. Rotate or replace posters of handwashing or cleaning protocols throughout the year so the message stays fresh. Visit [www.torkusa.com](http://www.torkusa.com) to download posters, handwashing videos and additional resources to share with your staff regarding the importance of hand hygiene – and how it affects a business.



Be specific in your training sessions especially in regards to hand awareness issues. Suggestions from the National Restaurant Association include:

- If your hands touch your hair or eyes/nose/mouth (the T-Zone), do not touch food or clean dishes and utensils
- Do not reuse food handling gloves
- Change gloves after handling raw meats, seafood or poultry
- Wash hands after handling dirty dishes or utensils and before handling food and drinks

While employees may not be as diligent as they should be about washing their hands when and how they should, customers are very aware that food can become contaminated during food production. According to the 2010 survey commissioned by SCA and Harris Interactive, 78 percent of American adults were at least somewhat concerned about contracting or spreading foodborne illnesses<sup>1</sup>. The consistent message from the CDC remains that one of the most effective means of preventing foodborne illnesses is proper handwashing.

### Hygiene “Hot Spots”

In addition to conducting routine deep cleanings usually monthly, below are some additional hot spots to address to ensure your establishment is hygienic and fresh smelling. Identify and address problem areas of the front and back of the house:

#### ***In the front of house***

- Keep food containers covered in servicing areas to decrease cross-contamination and protect the food from dust
- Use only single use wipers to wipe down tables, buffet and floor service areas. Bacteria can live for days on a surface and for weeks on cloth whereas single use wipers clean and then are discarded
- Keep cutlery wrapped in napkins, preventing it from touching counter and table tops
- Keep paper towels near self-service areas to clean up spills
- Provide hand sanitizer dispensers as customers enter the restaurant and by buffets and other self service areas

### ***In the back of house***

- Install high-quality soap and hands-free paper towel dispensers to prevent contaminating clean hands
- Place towel dispensers by every sink and wherever spills or clean ups occur routinely
- Dispose of all used paper towels immediately in an approved waste container
- Keep work stations as free from clutter as possible to allow for frequent wipe downs with an appropriate cleaner

### **Color-coded Wipers**

Switch to disposable products that effectively clean and help avoid the spread of foodborne illnesses, including color-coded wipers. For example, use red wipers where raw meats are processed, green for the places where produce is cleaned, blue for general food preparation and serving areas and white for any place the customer can see you cleaning – discard the wipe as soon as it looks dirty.

### **Forgotten Work Station**

The restroom is often the forgotten workstation. Broken locks, overflowing trashcans, wet and dirty surfaces, lack of supplies, trash on the floor, no door hooks for purses and belongings, unpleasant odors, the list goes on. It's surprising how such a key area for customer impressions can go neglected but it happens more often than restaurant managers would like to admit and customers prefer to experience.



With restrooms playing such a pivotal role in overall customer satisfaction, here are some tips to help keep the restroom in check:

- Establish a cleaning routine with a checklist posted where customers can see it
- Anticipate peak restroom use times and schedule more frequent cleaning sessions
- Identify problem areas and determine solutions, such as paper towels on the floor from the lack of a waste container by door
- Use secret “customers” to check your cleaning plan

- Select environmentally responsible, fresh smelling cleaning products and use as directed
- Install hygienic dispensing solutions for paper towels, toilet tissue and soap that control consumption and require less frequent refills

### Décor is Key

Don't forget restroom décor— a mini bathroom makeover goes a long way. As noted in “Skip to the Loo!” by Linda Wright<sup>10</sup>, the restroom should be viewed as a marketing tool and element of customer care. The book chronicles the impact of a simple budget bathroom makeover while offering tips to help create and maintain an impressionable restroom. Décor factors such as color, fragrance, lighting, door hooks and even fresh flowers can go a long way in conveying a sense of quality. Carrying the décor theme of the restaurant into the restroom can make it more inviting. When planning the décor of the restroom, be sure to make it easy to clean quickly and effectively especially the sink area – faucets, soap and paper towel dispensers, and waste containers.

### Listen to Patrons

Restaurant patrons are sounding off on what they prefer in terms of hygiene and sustainability. Ultimately customers are loyal to those businesses that keep their wellbeing a top priority. For example, U.S. and Canadian consumers showed an overwhelming preference for using paper towels over hot air dryers, with more than 70 percent preferring this drying method in foodservice, office and healthcare facilities. In fact, more than 50 percent indicated they have avoided using hot air dryers while in a public restroom for reasons such as they take too long to dry hands or they don't dry hands completely.<sup>12</sup>



In addition to responding to customer preferences, additional benefits of using paper towels include:

- They are hygienic and available with 100 percent recycled content
- Using one-at-a-time dispensers helps control consumption/waste and reduce labor requirements to refill

Paper towels can also be used to shield employees' and customers' hands from germs often found on faucet and door handles. A similar study found that keeping hands clean after washing in a public facility is important to both businesses and customers with more than half (58 percent)<sup>1</sup> of U.S. adults using a paper towel to open the door at least sometimes when



exiting the restroom. Providing quality paper towels in your restrooms along with a one-at-a-time dispenser is a win for customers and businesses since it promotes healthy hand hygiene as well as a better bottom line. Place a small trash bin by the exit so patrons can discard their paper towel after touching the door handle.

## Spread the Word

Tap into positive word of mouth and build loyalty with social media. According to the NRA 2011 Restaurant Industry Forecast<sup>3</sup>:

- Ninety-two percent of social media savvy consumers eat a meal at a sit-down restaurant at least once a month and 87 percent purchase a meal or snack at a quick service restaurant or carry-out place at least once a month
- Social media savvy individuals are also more likely to connect with restaurants on Facebook, MySpace or YouTube (29 percent, compared with 16 percent of all consumers), and post or read reviews on consumer-driven websites such as Yelp (30 percent, compared with 19 percent)
- Eight out of 10 restaurant operators say social media will become a more important marketing tool in the future. More than half also say they are likely to incorporate Facebook, online review sites, Twitter and blogs into their marketing mix in the next two years

With the social media space so active, it's in a business' advantage to join in the conversation and increase buzz around positive experiences, while taking the higher road and correcting negative ones. The social media space is now another avenue of customer service that can be utilized to highlight your best hygiene and sustainability practices.

It's no secret. Positive things happen when restaurants foster the health of their patrons and employees. Food safety has always been and will remain a critical area of focus. Additional key impression areas such as the restroom must be treated with equal importance. In short, a clean restroom means healthy customers and employees, meaning better business.

To find out how Tork can help you, visit us at: <http://www.torkusa.com/>





## Resources:

- <sup>1</sup> 2011 Tork Report. <http://www.torkgreenhygienecouncil.com/Sustainability-Report2011web.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> 2010 SCA Business Report, Making Green and Clean a Part of Your Menu. [http://www.talktork.com/shared/pdf/Tork\\_Report\\_Green\\_Clean\\_Dining.pdf](http://www.talktork.com/shared/pdf/Tork_Report_Green_Clean_Dining.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> NRA 2011 Restaurant Industry Forecast. <http://restaurant.org/research/forecast/>
- <sup>4</sup> Tundra Specialties Poll. <http://www.prweb.com/releases/restaurant-industry/yelp-groupon/prweb5205144.htm>
- <sup>5</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/>
- <sup>6</sup> NRA 2007 Restaurant Industry Forecast. <http://www.restaurant.org/esdpdf/forecast2007.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Factors Impacting Food Workers' and Managers' Safe Food Preparation Practices: A Qualitative Study. [http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ehsnet/Docs/Factors\\_Impacting\\_Food\\_Workers\\_Food\\_Prep\\_FPT\\_journal.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ehsnet/Docs/Factors_Impacting_Food_Workers_Food_Prep_FPT_journal.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> Journal of Food Protection, Vol. 70, No. 3, 2007, Pages 661–666. [http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ehsnet/Docs/JFP\\_Food\\_Worker\\_Hand\\_Hygiene.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ehsnet/Docs/JFP_Food_Worker_Hand_Hygiene.pdf)
- <sup>9</sup> Talk Tork. <http://www.talktork.com/getgreen/>
- <sup>10</sup> Skip to the Loo! (Wright, 2007)
- <sup>11</sup> 2011 SCA and Harris Green Business Survey. <http://www.torkusa.com/news/News/SCAs-Tork-Brand-Releases-Green-Business-Survey-for-World-Environment-Day/>
- <sup>12</sup> 2011 SCA and IBOPE Zogby International Survey. <http://www.torkusa.com/news/Sca-News/global-handwashing/>

