

## How Your Restroom Can Help or Hinder Your Restaurant Business

By Mike Kapalko

Restaurant owners need to pay attention not only to the food and services they offer, but to the cleanliness of their establishment to repeat visits. Whether providing food on-the-go or a sit-down meal, research shows the cleanliness of a restaurant, specifically the restroom, is an integral part of a customer's dining experience. Cleanliness ultimately has a major impact on their loyalty to a foodservice establishment. Nothing can turn a visitor off more than a messy, wet restroom with scattered debris such as used paper towels on the floor.

Unfortunately, just about everyone has had at least one horrible restroom experience at a restaurant that ruined an appetite and had them leaving the premises 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. Clean, well-stocked washrooms show patrons that a restaurant owner cares about their well-being and overall experience and will leave them with a positive lasting impression.

According to Tom Bianco, chief executive officer of Atlanta-based restaurant consulting firm Centripetal Management, and a former executive chef at Romano's Macaroni Grill, a Brinker International concept, "There are restaurants where the washrooms are always clean; they always smell good and there is never water on the floor." If a restaurant takes that kind of pride in the hygiene of their 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, **Bianco 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."**

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### Proven Results:

According to a national online survey conducted by Harris Interactive and sponsored by SCA Tissue North America, restaurant patrons are far less likely to return if they find restrooms that are unkempt. A sample of 2,175 U.S. adults, found that of the 97 percent of U.S. adults who visit restaurants, 86 percent think restaurant hygiene is very important to their dining experience. Also, 88 percent of those who visit restaurants agree that restroom cleanliness reflects the hygiene standards throughout the establishment including kitchen and food prep areas.



The survey also found that 29 percent said they would never return to a restaurant with an extremely unclean or unsanitary restroom. The percentage of never-returns is much higher among people 35 and older (33 percent) than those 18 to 34 years of age (20 percent).

Negative restroom experiences trigger strong negative word of mouth, according to the poll. Fifty percent of those who visit restaurants said they would tell their friends and family about a negative experience with an unclean or unsanitary restroom, and 46 percent said they would avoid going to a restaurant because of a bad experience with a restroom that they had themselves or one they heard about from others.

Also, 42 percent of those who visit restaurants reported using toilet paper or paper towels to avoid touching things inside an unclean restroom in order to protect themselves from unhygienic conditions. The amount was 56 percent higher among females 35 to 44 years of age.

According to the poll, the top 10 restroom issues that would prevent restaurant patrons from returning are, in order of importance:

1. Overflowing toilets: 58 percent said this would prevent them from going to a restaurant
2. Unpleasant odors: 57 percent
3. Floors that were slippery or dirty with buildup, gum or other residue: 49 percent
4. Partitions, doors, doorknobs, walls or fixtures were dirty: 38 percent
5. Dirty and wet sinks and countertops: 38 percent
6. Insufficient toilet paper: 33 percent
7. Overflowing trash cans: 31 percent
8. Insufficient liquid soap: 28 percent
9. Toilet paper dispenser didn't work: 22 percent
10. Management/employees unavailable to report problems to: 19 percent

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### The Bottom Line:

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 negative feelings with others.

This negative word of mouth can have severe consequences on the success of a business, especially since 46 percent of restaurant goers 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 about their dissatisfaction

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 high-capacity soap and paper towel 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.

Additionally, poor restroom hygiene habits in employees can affect a business' profits. Employees can become ill if they do not wash their hands properly after visiting 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 viruses that risk the health of patrons.

Also, an issue resulting from poor restroom hygiene can result in a financial and legal liability for the restaurant as well as damage its reputation, which can cause negative publicity from which it can be difficult to recover.

### **Start with the Staff**

Implementing good restroom hygiene practices involves teaching the staff on a daily basis. "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," Bianco 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, he says. It is important to educate and even re-educate your staff on proper restroom hygiene practices, especially the most important of them all, hand-washing. Proper hand hygiene can reduce the risk of foodborne illness 25 percent and offers a 25-50 percent reduction in absenteeism.

### **The Forgotten Work Station**

The restroom is often the forgotten workstation. Broken locks, overflowing trash cans, wet and dirty surfaces, lack of supplies, trash on the floor, no door hooks for purses and belongings, unpleasant odors, and 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:

#### **Clean Restroom Tips**

- 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, whether minor or major, goes a long way. As noted in the book "Skip to the Loo!" by Linda Wright, 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.



### What's Under the Microscope?

Although a washroom may appear to be clean on the surface, on a microscopic level it may be swarming with germs. Industry reports have estimated that approximately 30 percent of people avoid using a public restroom because of their awareness of germs' presence. Operators striving to decrease germs' presence must consider reducing cross contamination, bacteria and odor.

From entrance to exit, facility managers must employ comprehensive systems that protect the health of customers. One way many germs are spread is by cross contamination. For example, a lever on a towel dispenser can carry thousands of germs. Touch-free innovations found in restrooms can certainly cut down on cross contamination, however minimizing the soil that enters and leaves the washroom is also key to decreasing infection. Although restrooms typically account for only five percent of a building's total space, they obtain approximately 40 percent of a facility's entire soil load. Furthermore, the soil found in restrooms is much more harmful than dirt found in other areas of a facility. With various water sources, high foot traffic and several other variables, restrooms often contain germs and bacteria that can lead to serious illnesses. Last but certainly not least is odor. Odor is typically the first area a patron will notice after entering the washroom. And, where there is smoke there is fire—offensive odor usually means bacteria is present. Besides obvious sources, malodor can be the result of:

- A faulty water drain
- The abundance of urine near urinals and toilets
- Lack of or inadequate cleaning
- An ineffective odor control program
- Bacteria buildup in grout lines

Today manufacturers have made it easy for end-users to implement an effective odor-control program. Ideally, experts suggest that operators incorporate one odor-control dispensing system for every two or three toilets/urinals. Although adequate ventilation, square footage and number of toilets seem to be leading factors when selecting an odor-control program, a system that is effective, cost-efficient, less susceptible to vandalism and requires the least amount of maintenance are also leading needs of the cleaning staff. And, the best part of today's odor-control options is that these systems come in various options, including touch-free.

### Products That Can Take Your Restroom to The Next Level

Bathroom suppliers should strongly consider using 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. In fact SCA research shows that hot air dryers can increase the bacteria counts on your hands up to 500 percent, while using a clean, dry, paper towel to dry your hands removes up to 99.9 percent of the germs from your hands. What's more, 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 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.

### 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 well-being a top priority. 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 solutions can help you, visit us at [www.torkusa.com](http://www.torkusa.com).

## Resources:

2011 Tork Report. <http://www.torkgreenhygienecouncil.com/Sustainability-Report2011web.pdf>

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)

NRA 2011 Restaurant Industry Forecast. <http://restaurant.org/research/forecast/>

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)

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)

Talk Tork. <http://www.talktork.com/getgreen/>

Skip to the Loo! (Wright, 2007)

2011 SCA and Harris Green Business Survey. <http://www.torkusa.com/news/News/SCAs-Tork-Brand-Releases-Green-Business-Surveyfor-World-Environment-Day/>

2011 SCA and Harris  
The Importance of Restaurant Hygiene to your Bottom Line  
<http://www.torkusa.com/Resources/downloads/white-papers/all-white-papers/>

The Impact of Restaurant Hygiene on Customer Loyalty  
<http://www.torkusa.com/Resources/downloads/white-papers/all-white-papers/>

2011 SCA and IBOPE Zogby International Survey.  
<http://www.torkusa.com/news/Sca-News/global-handwashing/>