

JIM LOPOLITO HOSPITALITY PRODUCTIONS



THE DANGERS OF COMPROMISED RESTAURANT SANITATION

Two of the most challenging fundamentals that hospitality operators face in maintaining their daily operations are cleanliness and sanitation. In my recent blog; “The Influence of “Clean” in FOH Food Service Operations”, I described dealing only with cleanliness. This blog will describe sanitation aspects of keeping customers safe.

Let me get something out there right away. There are restaurants not maintaining proper sanitation standards and they are getting you sick. There are businesses that are operating with staff that have no idea about proper food handling, and they are handling your food in an unsafe manner. There are signs in almost every restaurant kitchen and restroom that tell staff to wash their hands after performing certain actions and there are employees that do not follow this procedure. Cutting boards and knives are not being rotated or sanitized between foods processed with cross contamination occurring. Ware washing temperatures are not being maintained when equipment fails and weeks go by without repairs. I can list reason after reason why there is risk in the hospitality industry and why you need to be careful about where you eat. Fortunately, most restaurants do their part to keep you safe.

Health Departments throughout the country have established regulations and are responsible for the supervision of health and sanitary standards and inspections throughout the food service industry, but it is the establishment that needs to perform the steps to keep you safe. Since about 2010 new methods in sanitation grading have come along depending on your location in the United States and Canada. The common goal is keeping a safe environment, as there are potential serious risks to patrons if poor standards are maintained. In New York, lettering with window place cards of “A, B or C” are used to indicate compliance with 100 points being an “A” and a letter change with each 13 point deduction. In another example, Newton Massachusetts uses a number valuation place card beginning at 400 with each 40 points reducing the level of compliance achieved.

When unsafe conditions are encountered I feel our violation guidelines are not tough enough. An “A Grade” in New York, which offers a limited exposure to risk, is a commendable achievement and what all business owners should strive for and maintain. However curve-balls come along and missteps by staff occur so you must be prepared to rectify situations quickly. When something occurs to throw you off track there is the “B Grade” designation with written alerts and recommendations for improvement. This to me should be the warning stage with rapid progress expected back to an “A”. Any business that maintains an “A Grade” should be

commended, as this is not an easy standard to maintain without constant consideration to having well trained staff and management that pursues this result. When a “B Grade” occurs, sufficient time to rectify is offered, and it is important to note that violations do not always pertain to the management of a food product or an infestation. For instance, a broken screen door in the kitchen can be a violation. While this has no direct connection to the handling process, it does impact the allowance of infestations or pests. As long as the standard of an “A Grade” is maintained the business should feel good about their performance.

However we are a society of allowances and tolerations where a “C Grade” is offered below the “B Grade”. If you read the outline of performance issues that deliver a “C Grade” Violation you would most likely not be eating in this business. I would like to see the “C Grade” become a “Condition of Closure” until improvements to a “B Grade” have been met. Some restaurants hide the “C Grade” notice for fear that you will not go inside, and unless you like risk, you should not frequent a business like this. If an inspected property is provided a “B or C Grade” they are allowed sufficient time to address the issues. With a “C Grade” one month is specified for a return inspection, however it may take longer, and often times the re-inspection results in continuous violations in the “C Grade”. Realize that during this time the business remains open for service under conditions that expose the customer to serious potential risk. In my professional opinion, there should be no acceptance of an owner that does not maintain their food service business in a condition that reduces the risk of food-borne illness to the public.

To a customer walking in the door of a food service business it is the visual aspects that are essentially the reason they remain or return, at least beyond the food and service quality. If a business looks clean you are much more likely to remain a customer. However, clean is not sanitary, and the differences are significant. You hear all the time that if a bathroom is clean the kitchen is clean, and although you would like this to be true, I am here to expand upon this. Having a clean washroom is great but this does not mean it is sanitary, and it certainly does not mean that the kitchen is sanitary. It is very important to understand that just being clean in a kitchen is not an acceptable level of safety when handling food. There are strict Health Department Regulations and sanitary procedures that must be followed in order to reduce the risk of food-borne illness, and the list of processes is rather significant. Take one example of dish washing procedures where water temperature during the wash cycle must be maintained at 140 degrees Fahrenheit for a specific length of time, with a rinse temperature of 180 degrees Fahrenheit also at a specific length of time depending on local regulation. These temperatures must be maintained on every cycle in order to reduce risk. When a dishwasher breaks down the risk to the public increases significantly. When this occurs a business is supposed to take responsibility and stop using china and silverware until the machine is fixed, or clean by hand like under the standards of a three compartment sink process with 140 degree water and an approved method of sanitizing.

Here is a twist in all of this. Many people do not realize that occurrences of suspected food-borne illness are not always from the restaurant you just ate in, although after we eat and get ill it is assumed this is the case. In fact, real cases often do not befall upon the suspecting customer until four or more hours have passed, so it could be your breakfast or lunch that was

suspect. Also know that if you do not wash your hands properly before eating you may be the carrier of your own symptoms. Any undesirable symptoms you have after visiting a restaurant could very well be from the last handshake, the last doorknob, the last elevator button you pressed, or even an allergy symptom. The public needs to understand washing hands prior to eating helps restaurants avoid accusations of sickness from their food when the cause could be from external origins. I am of the opinion there should be a method of hand sanitation procedures established prior to food service that customers must acknowledge as part of the beginning process before they begin to eat. Most people do not wash their hands upon entering an eatery, with averages of approximately 60% men and 40% woman, so the establishments themselves must take steps in order to protect themselves. This is no easy task.

A clean and sanitized business with effective procedures offers the safest customer experience, and will realize continuous and improved sales as long as food and service quality are co-existing. I am in constant disbelief at how many businesses continue to operate in an unclean and unsanitary manner, and at the same time place the blame of reduced business upon staff or on external environments that may be reducing sales. Running a business under poor or unsanitary conditions for any length of time will always result in customer loss or someone succumbing to a food-borne illness. In addition, I believe that any food service owner that does not commit to the processes necessary in protecting their customers should not be in business.

I realize these are harsh words, and I am not looking to put anyone out of business. In fact, I want to help improve the failure percentages that are widespread in this industry, which is one of the main reasons I went into consulting and why I associate myself with other organizations that are committed to this change. We all want safe and risk free conditions when eating food, and to know that there are so many people that are on board with this effort is very comforting. If you enter a restaurant and think they could be cleaner, say something. Let the owner know that it is unacceptable for the floors or tables, or the restroom to be dirty. If they do not listen there are many of us that will.

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