

Which Service Vendor Could Cost You Millions In Minutes?

By: Phil Ackland

Every year there are approximately 6,000 building-damaging fires involving the kitchens of commercial cooking facilities. The vast majority started on the appliances and spread to the exhaust system. Many could have been prevented or greatly reduced in intensity and cost if the combustible grease in the exhaust system had been properly removed.

To many restaurant owners, the concept of exhaust cleaning is viewed as a janitorial process, like garbage pick up or window washing. This is wrong; grease that accumulates in an exhaust system is fuel. The act of "cleaning" this grease eliminates a serious fire hazard.

Kitchen exhaust cleaning is not cosmetic -- It is fire prevention!

Nearly every major restaurant chain has had a building damaging fire. Most have had more than one. So why is so little attention paid to this service?

We believe it is knowledge.

The following are just a few ways that restaurants can reduce the risk of fires in their exhaust system.

Inspections

Train supervisors to inspect the exhaust system. Make this inspection part of a regularly scheduled practice when they are visiting sites (at least once a year). Don't just ask the store about its cleaning service -- Open the system and stick a flashlight in! What do you see?

Other suggestions are:

- Do an internal audit/survey of the conditions, construction and installations of the exhaust systems
- Identify the most likely locations for inspection
- Learn to recognize the most serious issues, whether they are cleaning or some installation deficiency that could result in serious damage if there is a fire.
- Contract an outside inspector. Confirm that the inspector knows the local Building and Fire Codes (especially NFPA 96). Be cautious of exhaust cleaners! Some have the ability to do in-depth inspections, but many will only be trying to sell their cleaning service. A professional inspector must be able to give you a written report on the installation conditions, accessibility and cleanliness of the exhaust system.

Rudimentary Staff Training

Provide your on-site staff management with basic knowledge of how the exhaust and suppression systems should function:

- What are the expectations and needs of the exhaust system
- Filter maintenance. Train staff to inspect the exhaust system when the filters are out for cleaning. Simply look!
- How to identify when the exhaust system is in need of grease removal
- What regular maintenance local staff should do and what the cleaning contractor should do.
- What sort of paper trail should the cleaner provide

Exhaust Cleaners

- Create a cleaning protocol for all your facilities
- Require that all exhaust cleaning companies understand the expectations and responsibilities they must bear to provide this service. They must clean in accordance to NFPA 96
- Demand that the exhaust cleaning company provide a Crew Leader (the individual who will be on the jobsite) that is *Trained, Qualified and Certified* according the NFPA 96 requirements. This Crew Leader must be knowledgeable of his or her expectations and responsibilities to you. Make them sign off on these!
- Insist on a comprehensive written report on the condition and cleanliness of your exhaust system. Do not accept simply worded "accessible areas cleaned" reports. Ask for clear details on what was performed and what the findings were.

Frequency of Cleaning

- When the exhaust system is properly cleaned, clients can actually reduce the number of cleanings; while maintaining a safe standard. This can result in considerable savings. Only thorough inspections can qualify the necessary frequency requirement.

There are many responsible exhaust cleaning contractors. They are willing and able to assist you in reducing the risk of serious fires in your exhaust system. A serious fire can close a restaurant for weeks, months even years. With only a little knowledge you can improve the safety of your staff, the risk to your building and to your bottom line.

Phil Ackland sits on the NFPA 96 committee. He consults and teaches fire prevention to the insurance industry, fire departments and the food service establishments. He is the author of a series of manual on fire safety in commercial kitchen.

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