An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure goes the axiom. When it comes to safety, a small amount of foresight can prevent employees or customers being harmed and protect the restaurant’s reputation and bottom line.

The industry is full of potential hazards. Employees can slip and fall on a greasy floor, cut or burn themselves with sharp or hot items, even sprain or strain themselves when lifting and carrying something that’s awkward or heavy. Customers can slip on a puddle of liquid or trip on the way to the restroom.

Many of these hazards are preventable if you have a mindset toward safety. But in a fast-paced environment, even best practices can fail, said Nathan Haupt, general manager for Schreiner’s Restaurant in Fond du Lac. A puddle that’s not wiped up or highlighted with a sign, a knife cut or a grease burn can lead to a worker’s compensation claim.

“It’s not catastrophic like in manufacturing,” he said. “But little stuff can quickly turn into a mountain.”

Haupt emphasizes vigilance as the first level of safety. Schreiner’s consistently has a manager on the floor every day the restaurant is open. “Our ownership and management are in the restaurant every day of the week,” he said. “When we’re here, we’re doing our rounds and we have our eyeballs on everything.”

“We can deal with things literally as they’re happening. Staff can share with us in real time what they’ve seen or experienced.”

**OSHA regulations: avoiding hazards**

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires operators to make and keep the workplace safe from recognized hazards that can cause death or physical harm to a worker. Prevention is key.

Operators are responsible for having safe tools and equipment—and for properly maintaining them. Potential hazards should be highlighted with color codes, posters, labels or signs to warn employees of dangers.

First aid kits, emergency plans and reporting responsibilities in the event of an accident must be on-site and easily accessed. Because OSHA considers the restaurant industry to be relatively low risk, most operators aren’t required to keep records of work-related illnesses and injuries, but of course must carry worker’s compensation insurance for employees who might be injured on the job. OSHA recommends operators...
conduct an annual safety audit to spot potential issues.

**Training: key to prevention**

“We do spend a lot of time on training and preventing problems,” Jason Valentine, vice president, operations for Cousins Subs, acknowledged. “We have training tools and systems in place.” Cousins requires its employees to use its Cousins University, a mobile friendly, training application featuring interactive quizzes. These are not your father’s training videos with the dated wardrobe, poor acting and laughable scenarios. Cousins University features “micro learning” and emphasizes accountability.

“What we’ve done differently is that we’ve invested in people creating content rather than just in trainers,” said Valentine. The corporation hired a former Cousins front-line employee, Riley Kirchoff, as their graphic designer for training and operations.

Kirchoff has created 18 training modules, all of which last just five minutes or less. The modules “game-ify” learning, but emphasize specific outcomes. “We still have to make sure people are learning and not just playing games,” he said.

Schreiner’s produces a monthly newsletter that’s distributed with the paycheck “so we know they get it,” said Haupt. If the restaurant is having a rash of a particular type of incident, it can be addressed in the newsletter.

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**Help!**

**Q:** Is there help available for safety issues at my restaurant?

**A:** A great place to start would be to search the revamped Buyer’s Guide on the WRA website www.wirestaurant.org and search for supplier members who offer safety related services and products.

The OSHA website – www.osha.gov has many free downloadable or interactive tools that can help you make sure you are following their standards and maintaining a safe workplace.

Give your local chapter of the American Red Cross a call or check out their website. They have publications and classes for businesses.
Cameras in the restaurants also record activity 24/7. “If something happens and it’s preventable, we can adapt or change our current policies as need be,” he said.

Food safety: it’s all about training

In 2016, Cousins rolled out a new series of raw chicken products, which had the potential for significant risk for both employees and customers. Before launching the new product, “we had a [three-tiered] plan on training and execution that was very effective,” said Valentine.

Step one was purchasing new equipment to protect the customer and the employee from the hazards posed by uncooked chicken. Step two was making the process involved in cooking and assembling the products user friendly. Valentine, who came up the ranks from a front-line employee, knew firsthand that any process must be realistic, easy to execute and consistent.

The third step was people. Before going live, the company prepared its employees to succeed. “We put a lot of time in online learning and on-site training,” he said. There have been no incidents.

To guard against foodborne illnesses, the company is in “prevention mode.” Managers have a checklist that records the temperature of the food twice a day.

Although the company does tours of third-party vendor warehouses, “we don’t try to solve safety issues from outside the restaurant,” said Valentine. “We give the managers the process to protect their own environments.”

Life and death emergencies: choking, heart attacks

For Schreiner’s the longevity of its workforce plays a significant role in preventing problems. “Retention is a built-in safety net,” said Haupt. “We’re not having to continuously hire and train.”

Chico Pope, owner of the Buckhorn Supper Club in Milton, has a similar advantage. “We have a staff that doesn’t turn over much,” said Pope. “It’s been many years since we’ve filed a worker’s compensation claim.”

Despite a clean record on employee safety, Pope and the Buckhorn have experienced several choking incidents among their customers. “I have performed the Heimlich maneuver three times in the last six years,” said Pope, “and one employee performed it herself on a customer several months ago.”

Following the first incident, the Buckhorn scheduled a training class that reviewed the Heimlich as well as cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. Pope has also hung posters explaining how to perform the Heimlich throughout the restaurant.

In addition, the Buckhorn has both an automated external defibrillator (AED) and an EpiPen available for people who experience cardiac arrest or anaphylactic shock. Staff are trained to administer either tool. Schreiner’s also has an AED on site.

Food-allergy Emergency

Q: Wasn’t there some recent legislation about epipens in Wisconsin?

A: In 2015, Gov. Walker signed a law allowing restaurants to obtain epinephrine auto-injectors (commonly referred to as Epipens—a popular brand name) and keep them on hand, in case of a customer food-allergy emergency. The law also applies to preschools, summer camps, colleges and other entities that may encounter individuals with life-threatening allergic reactions (anaphylaxis). The program is voluntary.

The WRA Board of Directors voted in 2013 to support the initiative, as long as it included liability protection for restaurants, their principals and employees. WRA’s government relations team got an amendment added to ensure restaurants would face no additional liability from the new law, whether they choose to participate, or not.

In practice, the law allows a restaurant operator to get a prescription from a doctor for an epinephrine auto-injector, and to have that prescription filled at a pharmacy. The restaurant must have at least one employee trained to use the epinephrine auto-injectors. The training is available online and only takes about 30 minutes. The training has to be taken once every four years. The Red Cross offers a course for only $20 (Visit www.redcross.org). Keep in mind you will need to make sure the prescription is kept current.
Fire: smoke or conflagration
Since the ban on smoking in indoor spaces was enacted, the risk of certain types of fires has declined. However, the back of the house remains an obvious hazard.

“In my experience, not properly cleaning the facilities is one of the big causes of fires,” said Tony Giovannetti, manager of the fire division at Green Bay’s Vorpahl Fire and Safety. Another cause? Employees not knowing how to work the appliances, especially those that use gas.

Vorpahl sells kitchen equipment in addition to providing fire extinguishing and fire suppression systems and training on fire safety. The company will clean and replace the filters under kitchen hoods that capture grease.

For an operator, having a fire may seem like an incredibly rare event. But from where Kevin Wondra, director of sales and marketing at Fond du Lac’s Society Insurance sits, “it’s not surprising to us.”

Of all the potential hazards to hit a restaurant, fire is the most severe, he said. “It costs the most and puts the entire [restaurant’s] livelihood at stake. “For a restaurant owner, their retirement plan is their business. Fire could wipe all that out.”

Understanding the damage that fire can do, people are willing to “take a little more interest in their assets,” said Vorpahl’s Giovannetti.

As part of its training program, Vorpahl works with employees to identify all classes of fire and procedures to follow in the event one occurs. Their PASS system—pull, aim, squeeze and sweep—teaches employees how and when to use the two types of extinguishers. Mix them up and a small flame can easily become a conflagration.

Slips and falls: the benefits of ergonomics
Slips and falls are the incidents that occur with the highest frequency, said Wondra. For employees on the cooking line, the tile floor gets very slippery.
without a non-slip floor mat and non-slip soles on shoes. It’s important to use an appropriate cleaning solution to eliminate grease on the floor.

In the front of the house, Wondra urges operators to use best practices in training employees to recognize the often-overlooked wet spot on the floor and clean it up or place a warning sign.

This time of year melting snow will pool at entrances and exits and then freeze causing a temporary, yet very hazardous situation. Schreiner’s has a full-time dedicated staff member whose duty it is to salt and shovel during the winter. If the snowfall is too heavy, kitchen staff help out. Managers also come in early to shovel and salt.

Many painful injuries occur when an employee doesn’t perform the correct lift or attempts to lift something that’s too heavy for them. Although Schreiner’s has a dedicated stock person who does all the heavy lifting, that employee has help from a motorized conveyor system. Supplies come in by truck and are put on a conveyor that moves them into the restaurant’s basement.

“The stock person just has to stock the upstairs kitchen,” said Haupt. “A fry cook doesn’t have to run downstairs to get something because it’s already stocked in the pantry.” Hazard avoided.

**Spontaneous Combustion**

Q: I’ve heard about several restaurant fires that were traced back to grease and oil on napkins and towels. What’s that all about?

A: It’s an alarming trend. People sometimes joke about spontaneous combustion, but it can happen and isn’t a joke. Spontaneous combustion refers to the gradual increase in temperature, called an exothermic reaction, of a flammable material to the point of ignition. The exothermic process is a chemical reaction during which heat is generated. It’s likely that the exothermic reaction occurred from the oxidation of the oils on the fabric. Once the oils are exposed to a certain amount of heat (like in a dryer) the temperature will begin to rise and will continue until the oil and fabric smolders and ignites. Some of the factors related to spontaneous combustions are the amount of oil, the type of oil and the type of fabric. Un-removed oil will cause a buildup of oxidized, residual oil. Now that more unsaturated cooking oils like canola, soybean, corn and sunflower are being used, the probability of spontaneous combustion has increased. Additionally, the use of cotton towels to absorb spills contributes to this naturally occurring phenomenon. The single most effective means of reducing the chances of fire is the complete removal of the oil during laundering.

Here are some tips:

- Thoroughly rinse all oil and grease soaked towels with a combination of water and degreaser. Once the water and degreaser have been applied and hand rubbed, rinse the towels under running water to help remove grease.
- Wring the towels as dry as possible.
- Place towels in a covered metal container and close the lid tightly. If the lid is not closed tightly, an uninterrupted flow of oxygen could aid in the spontaneous combustion process. Remember, even towels that have been thoroughly rinsed could still contain residual amounts of oil that could ignite. A tightly sealed metal container is the best defense against spontaneous combustion.
- Do not tightly pack soiled towels in the storage container. If the towels are tightly packed the heat generated from the drying process will not dissipate. If the metal container is full, additional towels should be individually laid flat (nothing above or below them) on a noncombustible surface until completely dry.
- Terry cloth towels are the most susceptible to spontaneous combustion. The individual terry fibers create a massive amount of surface area where the oils can collect. The large amount of surface area makes this type of towel much more absorbent, but also harder to clean oils from after use.
- If you use a professional laundry service, cleaning towels should be exchanged frequently.

**Natural disasters: effective communication is necessary**

Not all accidents are manmade. Just ask Andy Coaker, risk and safety manager with HopCat/BarFly Ventures, whose
job includes overseeing loss prevention for the company. Headquartered in Grand Rapids, Mich., BarFly Ventures is the parent company for several bars and restaurants in Michigan as well as HopCat in Madison.

In 2016, a tornado hit Grand Rapids. “It wasn’t like something you’d see in a movie, but it did get part of the city before it dissipated,” said Coaker. It also caused a previously unknown safety issue.

During the incident, Coaker and his colleagues found it difficult to have effective communication with the staff and managers of the company’s Grand Rapids locations. “Staff followed the policies that had been in place but the policies didn’t account for a natural disaster,” he said.

Worse, “one instance is not the same as the next so there’s no cookie cutter policy” that could have been implemented. “Since that time, it’s forced us to look at ways to communicate with our staff and managers,” said Coaker.

Upgrades to communication have taken on several forms including emergency e-mails and phone applications that allow texting and alerts to staff. The company is also working to find better ways to monitor situations before disaster strikes.

Programs that track weather, crime and other issues in the communities where BarFly has its properties are being assessed. “These [programs] will allow us to remotely monitor these sites and give us alerts based on location,” he said. “We’ll be able to alert managers so they can make good decisions. We’re empowering managers to do what’s most effective.”

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“Today training gives employees the tools to proactively get ahead of safety [problems] before they occur”

–Andy Coaker

Safety tools: partner with others

Like many restaurants, when BarFly opens a new location, they have a corporate training team that trains employees on everything from service to safety procedures. This training gives employees the tools to proactively get ahead of safety [problems] before they occur, said Coaker. “We want to be proactive rather than reactive.”

The company is also rolling out a safety reference guide next year that will address anything that could possibly come up. “If they can’t get a hold of someone, the staff will have a hands-on resource to consult,” he said.

BarFly has developed its own safety resources combining internal audits, external resources and a constant collaboration of their operations team. “We’ve developed our own training materials specific to our brand and our own culture that are tiered to the high standards we’re looking for,” said Coaker.

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But BarFly is not totally reinventing the wheel. “One thing we encourage is partnering with others in the industry,” he said. “Some of our best information comes from those who have succeeded at a higher level in the industry.”

Society Insurance has partnered with the Wisconsin Restaurant Association to offer a variety of insurance products, training and safety audits for over 30 years. Wondra serves on the WRA board, a position that alerts the company to industry-specific safety problems—allowing them to head them off with new products before they become huge risks.

“We’re a large expense on a restaurant’s profit and loss statement and we want to work with [operators] so something [bad] does not happen,” he said.

Wondra recommends operators conduct an annual safety audit either by one of the company’s agents or by a manager/owner. “Over the course of a year your exposure may change,” he said. For example, there could be a new employee who wasn’t trained properly. Also, regular use causes more wear and tear on the building and equipment. New threats: ever evolving

For operators, cyber risks are the newest frontier. Don’t think you’re immune to hackers. If you run a customer’s credit card on anything but a point-of-sale database on your computer, you could be open to a costly hack. Many restaurants are now conducting business over the Internet allowing customers to pay for carry out or delivery orders on their website. Society is launching a new product for policy holders that covers cyber risks. Workplace violence is also an evolving threat. In a webinar, hosted by the National Restaurant Association, Terri M. Solomon of the Littler Mendelson law firm in New York recommended five tips for preventing workplace violence.

• Adopt a zero-tolerance policy on employee-involved workplace violence and publicize it.
• Train staff.
• Conduct background checks.
• Do a safety audit.
• Create a threat/incident management team.

Preventing trouble is always preferable to cleaning up after it. Make sure your restaurant puts safety on the front burner. WR

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