

Restaurant and Hotel Safety: Keys to Preventing and Managing Accidents and Incidents

By Alan Someck

The pressure to run a successful hospitality operation is greater than ever. Between rising labor, food and rent costs and an intensely competitive marketplace, owners are finding it tougher to reach a profitable bottom line. Now add to this the fact that the industry is a popular target in the legal arena with wage, discrimination, harassment and accident lawsuits which can often add up to significant expense for the operator. For owners to successfully manage this difficult environment, they must operate at a very high and professional level and become proactive in addressing the threats to their business. In terms of preventing and managing accidents, this means developing and implementing a system of safeguards that minimize exposure. This article will focus on accidents and incidents due to slips and falls, cuts and burns and foreign objects found in food. The following are keys to creating that system:

Prevention of Accidents and Incidents:

1. **Owner's Attitude:** Nothing of consequence will be developed unless the owner takes prevention seriously and passes on their concern to the rest of the staff in an effective and organized way. Focused attention needs to be paid to smart procedures. Ownership needs to be fully engaged and supportive. A "culture of safety" needs to be developed where staff recognizes and acts upon the importance of methods to minimize accidents and incidents.
2. **Specific Written Guidelines:** The culture of safety needs to be translated into a written set of specific guidelines that are understood and followed by staff. This can also include videos and online training tools. Ownership may want to bring in an outside consultant to help set this up or do the research themselves to apply best practices. Guidelines for preventing slips and falls, cuts and burns and preventing foreign objects from getting in food should include:

Slips and Falls:

- Do a full risk assessment of the operation. For example, if there are steps in the dining room leading to a basement, make sure there is proper lighting, signage and safe flooring. Make sure chairs are secure and repaired. Assess all potential areas of concern and address them with clear action steps.
- Make sure floor surfaces in the front and back of the house and all stairs have acceptable traction to prevent slippage and high quality mats that are not curled up are used where necessary.
- Have a specific cleaning and mopping procedure in place for the kitchen and dining room. When possible seek out sustainable cleaning products as they pose less toxic threat to those who come in contact with them.
- Make sure staff has proper shoes.
- Keep all handrails secure and make sure all wiring is set up to avoid trips and slips.
- Repair all uneven floor surfaces.
- Make sure all drains are cleared.
- Have specific procedures for when it rains: ei. The use of mats and umbrella stands by the front door.
- Designate specific staff with assigned tasks related to prevention.

Cuts and Burns:

- Insure proper knife skills are taught and practiced by all kitchen staff.
- Have staff always use the proper tool for the job.
- Have knives sharpened on a regular basis.
- Provide appropriate safety gear when needed such as glasses and gloves.
- Make sure staff is fully aware of potential burn hazards.
- Understand the use and potential hazards of all chemicals used in the operation. Look to replace standard highly toxic cleaning chemicals with effective low or non-toxic alternatives.
- Make sure all equipment operates properly and is secured in a safe place to use.
- Have a complete and updated first aid kit.
- Have proper lighting in all prep and service kitchen areas.
- Make sure all electrical equipment is grounded and outlets are properly secured.

Foreign Objects Found in Food:

- Use only reputable suppliers for food product.
- Have clear and thorough procedures for the cleaning of food product.
- Have no foreign objects within the vicinity of food prep.

3. **Training and Reinforcement:** Choose designated leaders to carry out training and reinforcement. First aid and possibly CPR training should be provided. Use staff meetings as reminders of various safety issues. Update training materials when necessary. Have the proper supplies organized in designated areas.

Managing Accidents and Incidents:

1. **Have Staff React Quickly and Efficiently:** Staff needs to understand instantly what they are to do and carry out their responsibility. They have to quickly assess priorities and act on them. For example, in a slip and fall, first priority needs to be towards the guest or employee who has fallen and to make sure they are as safe as possible. Staff needs to immediately understand what they can and can't do from a safety and medical standpoint, such as how to move an injured person, if at all. If there is a burn or cut, trained staff should immediately get necessary supplies and apply them. Be prepared to follow all proper procedures in handling any burns, including chemical. Calling for emergency help always has to be considered and acted upon quickly. Owner or other management should immediately take charge and direct other staff.
2. **Secure the Area:** There needs to be a system in place to efficiently secure the area of the accident so the injured party stays safe and no other complications occur. For example, the use of bright colored cones and wet floor signs need to be placed in specific strategic areas. It also is important that the rest of the customers or staff is kept away from the incident area.
3. **Accident and Incident Reports:** A written report should be thorough and completed as soon as possible when memory is fresh and witnesses are available. If a statement from a witness cannot be objectively verified, don't take it as fact and phrases such as "witness alleges" or "witness claims" should be the preferred language. It may be helpful to create diagrams and take photos to enhance the clarity of the report. If appropriate, reports should be provided to the insurance company immediately.

4. **Accident and Incident Feedback Loop:** No matter how well the operation is prepared, accidents and incidents will occur. It is critical to always get better and learn from any incident that takes place and share the evaluation with the rest of the staff. Management should do a thorough analysis of the incident with feedback given to the staff. Lessons learned should be discussed with an emphasis on improvement.

The hospitality entrepreneur needs to wear a multitude of hats in carrying out their business. The prevention and management of accidents and incidents has become an area that operators more than ever must seriously pay attention to as they go about running their establishments. Having a clear set of guidelines and procedures that are ingrained in a “culture of safety” is a most valuable insurance policy to carry.