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FEATURE

Cleaning Solutions

COVID-19 is impacting how c-stores achieve clean—and what it means if they don't.

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

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The beginning of any meaningful discussion of c-store cleanliness today must concede the following: “There isn’t a retailer that can guarantee a germ-free environment,” said Mike Zahajko, executive vice president of sales for CAF. That’s not to say it’s dirty; in fact, the industry has made great strides in upping its cleanliness game and positive perception among consumers. But if we’re talking about cleanliness in a COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 environment, we need to set expectations. And with that stipulation aside, let’s begin a discussion about c-store cleanliness.

Stipulation No. 2: There will be a new normal. “As we look ahead, let’s refuse to accept the idea of getting back to normal,” said Zoran Ploscar, CEO of Trillium Facility Solutions, which provides facility management services for multisite customers. “We aren’t going back, we’re moving forward.”

At least for the time being, that assessment appears to be playing out among consumers. U.S. shopping behaviors changed dramatically as stay-at-home orders took hold and consumers stocked up on pantry staples and household goods, according to Caitlyn Battaglia, associate client director with Nielsen. Shoppers made fewer trips to brick-and-mortar stores but bought larger quantities when they did venture out. Online and click-and-collect purchases jumped 32% in March, with 50% of holdouts (those who did not shop online) planning to do so in the future, according to “The Impact of COVID-19 on Shopping Behavior,” a report by marketing agency Blue Chip. And the No. 1 reason for online adoption: to minimize exposure to health risks (89% of respondents).

Until a COVID-19 vaccine or effective treatment protocol exists, exposure to health risks will be a lingering concern, and it’s one that store operators must address to reassure customers that they are shopping in a safe and secure environment. We spoke with industry experts who weighed in with recommendations for key focus areas.

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At a minimum, retailers should exercise protocols that adhere to CDC recommendations.

PROCEDURES

At a minimum, retailers should exercise protocols that adhere to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations, which address everyday cleaning steps, what to do when someone is sick and other considerations (see the NACS coronavirus resources page for links to cleaning and disinfecting resources and guidelines at www.convenience.org/coronavirus

(<https://www.convenience.org/Topics/Operations/Disaster-Preparedness/Coronavirus-Resources>)). The agency's guidelines focus on two key steps:

1. **Clean:** Routinely clean high-touch surfaces using soap and water.
2. **Disinfect:** After cleaning a surface, apply disinfectant using an EPA-registered household disinfectant, diluted bleach solution or alcohol solution with at least 70% alcohol. Certain products require that you leave them on a surface wet for a period of time; check the product label (bleach solutions should remain on a surface for at least one minute to be effective).

Certain cleaning chemicals require specific handling instructions; if so, make sure to train your workers accordingly when handling, complying with OSHA's Hazard Communication standard.

Cleaning and disinfecting have become de facto procedures for all facilities, but the work doesn't stop there. Zach Richter, president of Coast Workplace Solutions, recommends addressing internal risks among employees, some of which might be easily overlooked. For instance, tasks as routine as emptying a garbage should be reassessed. "Don't squish the bags when you lift them out. Lift the bag carefully and place it into another bag before tying it," he said.

PRODUCTS

Cleaning and disinfecting are not just about routine, said Scott Apter, president of Apter Industries, which manufactures cleaning products. "If you're trying only to teach a skill set, you'll fail. You must give [employees] the right [cleaning and disinfecting] products."

Apter's products are EPA-approved to kill the coronavirus, "which is a big thing," he said. "Keep in mind, the CDC does not approve products, and the USDA does not approve products." He recommends promoting this designation to your customers, something that may distinguish you from your competitors.

Like the CDC, Apter stresses routine and frequent cleaning of high-touch surfaces, which includes the main counter, credit card machines, door handles and coffee pots. "Those need to be addressed every hour or more. [...] If you think somebody touched it, wipe it. I walk around with a spray bottle and spray things all the time, even in the supermarket."

LAYOUT

In addition to cleaning and disinfecting, Richter said the lethality of the coronavirus and the ease with which it spreads may prompt stores to rethink their layouts and offerings, beginning with foodservice.

"C-stores that have self-serve areas, all of that must be rethought to include sneeze guards and reduce the chance of people getting their hands into the food product," he said. "Automation and packaging will be key, which will mean more pre-packaged items and individually wrapped cups and cutlery."

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Richter is installing plexiglass guards that shield store clerks and marking floor areas to space customers at least six feet apart. “You need to avoid clusters in your store,” he said.

Foodservice operations may undergo even more significant changes that require labor reallocation. “I know of one retailer who is considering putting in a coffee person in the morning to assist customers,” said Liza Salaria, senior principal consultant with Impact 21. “That coffee steward would grab the cup and preps, morphing self-service into full-service.”

Restroom amenities should be reconsidered, too, with things like providing paper towels and installing touchless faucets and soap dispensers. Whatever you do, don’t be afraid to promote your efforts to your customers, a possible competitive distinction. “If you have a professional come in weekly, get a sticker that announces that,” Ploscar said. “It shows you’re being proactive. You’re selling that perception now.”

FOCUS ON EXPECTATIONS

“Customers are now expecting a higher level of cleanliness and protective sanitation,” Salaria said. As such, implement robust cleaning and disinfecting processes, as well as provide your customers with self-service sanitation options, such as gloves and hand sanitizers they can use to navigate your store.

These will be among a growing list of customer expectations. Pay attention to what they, and others, are saying for guidance. *Consumer Reports* recently provided advice to its readers for handling gas pump handles and performing other tasks at a station. Like any high-touch surface, “pump handles and keypads can be contaminated,” the magazine said, “so take precautions to avoid exposure.” CR’s advice included the following:

- **Use disposable nitrile or latex gloves.** While CR advised consumers to carry their own, consider offering these gratis at the pump, along with sanitizing wipes, so motorists can wipe down the gas pump handle. Many c-stores provide gas gloves and are cleaning pump touchpoints and gas nozzles several times an hour.
- **Use hand protection when entering payment information at a keypad.** While some customers will bring their own gloves, consider offering disposables at your payment terminals. Many retailers wipe down keypads after every customer.
- **Clean your hands after you’re done.** Provide customers with hand sanitizer or wipes as they exit your store or at the fuel islands, reassuring them that you have their safety in mind.

BEST PRACTICES

Industry experts offer key tips for maintaining a clean c-store.

Scott Apter, president of Apter Industries

- Wash hands often and thoroughly with a high-quality hand cleaner.
- Use an appropriate disinfectant cleaner recognized by the EPA for killing the coronavirus.
- Continually disinfect counters, keyboards, tables, restrooms and any area where public contact occurs.

Mike Zahajko, executive vice president of sales for CAF

- Follow CDC guidelines and clean and disinfect high-touch areas regularly.
- Make sure you have products/tools, training and a process for follow-through.
- Provide customers control (offer hand sanitizer, gloves) and reassurance (let them see your team cleaning and share proof that you’re cleaning).
- Adjust or limit high concern activities (self-service food and drinks).

FOCUS ON LIABILITY

In the U.S., operating in the age of COVID-19 raises liability issues, where best efforts at cleaning and disinfecting may not be enough.

Retailers should take multiple steps to protect their employees and customers, according to Law360.com (<https://www.law360.com/>):

- **Stay informed:** Follow government reports to understand evolving risks, standards and best practices.
- **Issue warnings:** Post signage that warns customers you are unable to eliminate all risks of COVID-19 and remind them to maintain social distancing. “In many states, adequate warnings will be considered sufficient to protect business guests from dangers.”
- **Take preventive action:** “The steps recommended by official agencies, industry groups and the actions of competitors should be considered in shaping the proper response to the evolving pandemic.” These include CDC guidelines, those issued by state health authorities, as well as actions taken by others in your industry.
- **Regularly disinfect:** Systematically clean and disinfect your store and high-touch surfaces, documenting your regimen.
- **Maintain distance:** Introduce markings that space customers six feet apart (or whatever the evolving standard may be). Additionally, consider restricting in-store movement through aisles to one way, again using markings, if space allows. And do not overlook entrances and exits. “Ensure that measures taken to protect customers in the store do not lead to crowded and possibly dangerous conditions outside the location.”

“We expect that essential retailers, assuming they follow best practices to reasonably inform and protect their guests, may limit liability for infections allegedly originating on their premises,” Law360.com (<https://www.law360.com/>) said. “These businesses would be well advised to document the steps they are taking now to protect visitors. This may be a tall task in the middle of a crisis, but it can make all the difference if they are later forced to rely on an unreliable memory of events from the chaos of a pandemic.”

Finally, as we go to print, there is a debate in Congress about shielding businesses from litigation related to coronavirus, with Republicans marking it as their top priority in the next stimulus package. The Trump Administration has signaled support as well. “It is something we are looking at carefully,” said White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow at a recent White House press conference.

NACS is leading a coalition of essential industries who are advocating for liability protection from civil suits alleging that COVID-19 was contracted at businesses, provided the businesses were not grossly negligent. “Convenience stores were designated as an essential industry and asked to stay open to serve the needs of the American public during the pandemic,” said Anna Ready Blom, director of government relations at NACS. “Our retailers have implemented unprecedented virus mitigation measures to protect our employees and customers, and they should not have to bear the cost of unfounded litigation brought by some attorneys looking to take advantage of this crisis,” Blom said.

PARTNERSHIPS

Back to our initial premise: The *traditional* c-store is not a sterile environment. Perhaps COVID-19 is ushering in a new c-store model, where convenience is recalibrated, along with customer expectations. Turn to industry resources like NACS for ongoing guidance and support, while reaching out to relevant third parties for feedback. “Make the health department your friend,” Richter advised. “Have them come out to your store and guide you on what you should be doing. Make them a partner in your business.”

Additionally, if tackling the new norm is too labor intensive, consider working with a deep-cleaning service. “Don’t try to be a hero and quarterback everything yourself because likely, this is one small piece of a much larger comeback play,” Ploscar said. When selecting a cleaning service, “make sure

they use a CDC-recommended disinfectant. [...] It's a great way to boost employee and customer confidence."

Collectively, these focus areas promise to fundamentally change the operations at your store, beginning with labor. "I'm getting a lot of calls from retailers," Zahajko said. "They have a sourcing problem; there is a labor shortage." And even if retailers have a full staff, a question arises: Are there enough hours in the day to tackle jobs that are now far more time consuming? "In a pre-COVID world, a store maybe spent one to two hours a week cleaning their forecourt. Now, some are doing it hourly, 10 minutes per hour, maybe three hours per day."

That's a lot of extra work. And assuming you can get past that hurdle, your bottom line will no doubt end up far different than in previous years. That's the new norm in a COVID-19 and (hopefully soon) post-COVID-19 world.

Stay safe and prosper.

FREE RESOURCES

For services and supplies for cleaning and sanitizing, including training and CDC guidance for areas where COVID-19 could be present, visit www.convenience.org/coronavirus (<https://www.convenience.org/Topics/Operations/Disaster-Preparedness/Coronavirus-Resources>).

There, you can find the following resources:

- A list of companies that offer cleaning and sanitizing services and supplies for both inside the store and the fuel island.
- NACS e-learning partner Ready Training Online (RTO) has created a free seven-minute training module on how to help prevent the spread of illness and disease at businesses.
- A list of EPA-registered surface disinfectant products. The EPA notes that coronaviruses are enveloped viruses, meaning they are one of the easiest types of viruses to kill with the appropriate disinfectant product.
- CDC recommendations for the cleaning and disinfection of rooms or areas that those with suspected or with confirmed COVID-19 have visited.
- Free resources from the Partnership for Food Safety Education, of which NACS is a partner, about handwashing and food safety that retailers can download and share in stores.

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BY JEFF LENARD

foods, but they also crave waffle breakfast sandwiches and oversized, spicy hot dogs.

BY PAT PAPE

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BY CHRIS BLASINSKY

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