

GET FIRED UP ...TO CODE

How to eliminate costly code compliance issues.

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The cost of doing business for a retail operation is, of course, very involved. Inventory, salaries, utilities and infrastructure are all factored in. But what about the little things?

Time is money and the smart use of time can inflate or deflate operational budgets accordingly. In many instances, best practice might be to spend some money to reflect a better bottom line in the long run. One way to accomplish this is to subscribe to a course of preventive maintenance. Preventive maintenance will eliminate downtime, keep store personnel productive at the point of sale and maintain the aesthetic appeal of the store locations.

The fire protection functions required in stores lend themselves well to a plan of preventive maintenance. With mandated inspections and local jurisdictions involved, it is best for companies to hand over this “unglamorous” — but necessary — service to experienced professionals who can provide and schedule timely inspections so stores are kept within code and equipment remains operational.

Take fire extinguishers, for example. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) codes mandate annual inspections, yet there are many companies who are not proactive. As one facility manager of a financial company told me directly, “I only deal with fire extinguisher issues as they come up.” To which I asked if he realized that code requires annual inspections and he said, “Yes.” This was not a small chain but a company with more than 800 locations! I can’t even imagine how it will impact the company if a fire marshal cracked down on his locations, loaded them up with fines and the company had to pay higher service call rates. I *can* imagine how it will impact this particular facility manager, though. Should the same company have had a preventive maintenance (PM) contract for extinguisher service, annual

service would be scheduled, the units would be inspected and tagged, confirming everything is compliant, and next year’s appointment would be scheduled. This would significantly reduce costs because a technician would not need to rush in off the street to do the job. By scheduling 60 days in advance, a provider’s operation is streamlined, thereby reducing the cost of doing business, which is then passed on to the customer.

While fire extinguishers are relatively easy, other forms of fire protection become a bit more involved, labor intensive and mechanically complicated. Sprinkler, backflow, alarms and lighting are all part of fire protection. Each of these areas is unique and requires a higher level of expertise. Each should also have its own plan of preventive maintenance. In some parts of the country, sprinkler systems need to be inspected once a year, in other areas quarterly and still in other areas the inspections must be accompanied by a monthly visual preformed by a certified technician. It can become an organizational nightmare trying to remember which locations need to be serviced when and by whom. One slip off this regimen and what might happen can be similar to what happened to a chain store in New Jersey: \$80,000 in

fines! Yet, with the proper PM plan, the information will be input and acted upon in a timely manner, thus, avoiding code violations.

Additionally, it has been proven time and again that a proper preventive maintenance plan keeps the equipment functioning at an optimal level, reducing the possibility of mechanical breakdowns such as flooding or having a sprinkler head “pop” and showering your customers. A proper PM plan administrator will also have copies of all paperwork and reports on file, should it become necessary to produce this information at a moment’s notice.

Fire alarms present an entirely different set of issues. With the addition of phone line hookups and central station monitoring, alarm systems need to be working properly all the time. Regular inspections of alarm panels will decrease the chances of a trouble signal being sent or, even worse, the alarm being tripped. Three

a.m. wakeup calls to store managers can be held to a minimum if the system is looked at, cleaned, tested and certified on a regular basis. The local fire departments also will be happy to avoid that 3 a.m. call as well.

Of course, preventive maintenance will not eliminate service and emergency calls, but in many cases the total cost of fire protection will be reduced; there will be fewer service calls and, as a PM contracted service, the costs will be reduced. More importantly, though, you will be providing a safe environment for your customers and your employees and that is the best service money can buy.

Cost is one part of the productivity equation; the other is time. Time, in the end, does reflect in costs. A provider of fire protection service can manage the entire fire protection function of retail store chains, from scheduling, dispatching, monitoring and servicing all areas of fire protec-

tion. A one-stop shop approach will free facility managers to attend to other areas of maintenance and store operations. A single point of contact makes the customer comfortable with the service provider and the service provider knowledgeable about the customer’s business, which in the end will provide a smooth operation of service. **PRSM**

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