

LOOK, NO HANDS!

Cleaner restrooms, many of them utilizing new hands-free technology, encourage shoppers to stay and spend awhile. | **Joan Malek**

Price, selection and convenience are critical to retail success, but if you're not focusing on cleanliness, you could be missing a big opportunity to influence your VIP customers. Women make 80% of all retail purchase decisions, and particularly for those with infants and children in tow, nothing can grab her attention like a conveniently-located restroom that is clean and well stocked.

Increasingly, retailers and malls are recognizing that restrooms can be a differentiator. Take the Federated-May Department Stores merger, for example. As the Macy's brand is rolled out into regional markets in place of nameplates such as Marshall Field's and Kaufmann's, merchandise isn't the only thing changing. Fitting rooms and restrooms are getting facelifts to give them a fresh look and make them more inviting.

The fact is, public restrooms have a bad reputation and generally for good reason. How many times have you gone to use a restroom only to find standing water on the countertops, an empty toilet tissue dispenser, folded paper towels strewn about and a foul odor lingering in the air? Users don't want to touch flush handles, faucets or door handles because they perceive these areas as being covered with germs.

What's worse, the research supports



This Wal-Mart restroom utilizes solid surface lavatory systems, which are durable and easy to keep clean. It also has light-activated sensors for soap and water.

consumers' concerns. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that after using a public restroom, a person's hand can host as many as 200 million bacteria. Yuck! Yet, by selecting the right products and educating cleaning staff on proper sanitizing techniques,

you can help ensure that restrooms stay cleaner. Before we get to product specifics, let's take a closer look at where all the germs are lurking.

GERMS ALL AROUND

Dr. Charles Gerba, a microbiologist from the University of Arizona, has spent the better part of his career studying germs in the restroom. Much of his focus has been on the microorganisms ejected from the toilet during flushing, which contaminate the restroom with fecal microorganisms. According to Gerba, the biggest myth among consumers is that toilet seats are the dirtiest thing in the bathroom.

"The floor area in front of the toilet, inside sink basins and the outside of the sanitary napkin disposal are the most contaminated areas of any restroom," says Gerba. "Germ levels vary in restrooms from day to day, but we routinely find Hepatitis A virus, coliform and E. coli in our samples."

Gerba notes that the influenza virus is also frequently found on surfaces in restrooms. The flu can be transmitted by mouth or hand contact, and since the virus can survive up to 3 days on surfaces, it is easy to imagine the hundreds of restroom users that can be infected by touching a contaminated faucet to turn off the water after wash-

ing, or the restroom door when leaving.

Go TOUCHLESS

Eliminating the number of surfaces that users need to touch in a restroom is one of the best ways to minimize cross contamination. Automated flush valves on toilets and urinals; touchless faucets, soap and towel dispensers; as well as touch-free hand dryers ... virtually everything in the restroom can be specified in a no-touch model. Users appreciate touchless technology because they don't have to touch anything.

For engineers, building owners and facility managers, water conservation is the primary reason for specifying touchless fixtures. Touchless fixtures can save up to 30% of an average commercial facility's water consumption, since water shuts off automatically when a user's presence is no longer detected. Today's motion-sensitive fixtures are a significant advancement from earlier water-saving faucets that provide flow only when a lever is pushed.

Price is always a factor in restroom

design, but ease of installation is important, too. That's why it's good to know that installing touch-free fixtures is generally no more difficult than installing manually-operated fixtures. Innovative sensor-activated faucets, for example, feature above-deck electronics, which means that they install as easily as mechanical faucets.

IMPROVED HANDS-FREE TECHNOLOGY

The latest innovation in touchless is capacitive sensing technology, which provides optimal operation. Until recently, many facility managers were frustrated by malfunctioning touchless sensors caused by mirrors and other reflective surfaces, soap scum buildup and even users' skin tones. Capacitive sensing eliminates false activations and provides consistent operation in nearly any restroom environment. The technology is virtually maintenance free and eliminates the issues that plagued infrared-sensor technology commonly used in touchless technology.



This faucet has "capacitive sensing," which is the latest improvement in hands-free technology.

A faucet with capacitive sensing, for example, has an omni-directional detection zone, rather than a small sensor window or "sweet spot" under the spout. An electrical field surrounds the entire faucet and detects a user's presence from any angle of approach. The faucet activates because the user creates a significant change in the capacitive field they add to the overall conduc-

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tive capacity, which triggers activation.

Touchless has become the norm throughout the restroom including hands-free accessories such as hand dryers, paper towel dispensers and even soap dispensers. New hand dryers feature infrared sensors that activate the dryer when hands are placed 3 to 6 inches below the nozzle for touch-free use. Improved units dry hands in less than 25 seconds and are designed to automatically adjust voltage to all power conditions.

Not only do touchless soap dispensers increase hygiene, these fixtures also increase the overall cleanliness of the restroom. Touchless soap dispensers allow the user to obtain soap without removing his or her hands from the bowl, thus reducing the amount of water or soap splatter on the counter-top.

KEEP HANDWASHING CLEANER

As mentioned earlier, sinks are among the dirtiest areas of the restroom. From germs in the sink bowl to

wet backsplashes and dirty faucets, the wet environment combined with residual grime from handwashing and other contaminants brought over from other areas of the restroom can create a haven for germs and bacteria.

Selecting surfaces that are easy to clean and have fewer places for germs to hide makes for a cleaner handwashing area. Many facilities have found solid surface lavatory systems to be the best long term solution because they are extremely durable and the integrated bowls are much easier for janitorial staff to keep clean.

Solid surface lavatories have no sink rims or caulk seams that can trap dirt on the lavatory deck. Solid surfaces are nonporous and naturally resist germs, and unlike laminate materials, they will not warp or delaminate. Since lavatory systems have sprayheads mounted into the header of the lavatory, there are no faucets or handles to clean around.

HYGIENIC RESTROOMS WITHIN REACH

Look for other opportunities to keep areas cleaner throughout the restrooms. Stainless steel has long been used by restaurants for food preparation areas, and a new study released earlier this year by the Hospitality Institute of Technology and Management confirmed that stainless steel is less likely to harbor dangerous bacteria compared to other materials such as plastic laminate, wood and concrete.

One discount retailer has begun using stainless steel toilet partitions in all of its stores, primarily because they are extremely durable and difficult to scratch. But cleanliness is an added benefit. Stainless steel surfaces are easy to sanitize and keep restrooms looking like new Today, everything from toilet tissue dispensers to recessed trash receptacles and dispensers are available in stainless steel models with vandal-resistant features.

The CDC encourages all of us to thoroughly wash our hands and says it is

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"the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection." Most people have good intentions to wash their hands. A barrier to proper handwashing in public can be a lack of supplies, or malfunctioning equipment. If the soap dispenser is broken or a towel dispenser is empty, visitors have no alternatives but to leave with dirty hands that touch glass display cases, point-of-purchase key pads and more.

Cleaner retail restrooms start during the design and product selection process. Be sure to get involved during restroom renovations and new construction, if possible, because those decisions will make your job of keeping restrooms looking and smelling new much easier. Even if selecting more

durable restroom fixtures costs slightly more initially, store management will thank you in the long run when they aren't getting complaints about the dirty restrooms. **PRSM**

JOAN MALEK IS A SENIOR PRODUCT MANAGER AT BRADLEY CORPORATION, A MENOMONEE FALLS, WISCONSIN-BASED MANUFACTURER OF PLUMBING FIXTURES, WASHROOM ACCESSORIES, PARTITIONS, EMERGENCY FIXTURES AND SOLID PLASTIC LOCKERS. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL (800) BRADLEY OR VISIT BRADLEYCORP.COM.

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