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CLEANING OPERATIONS: Restroom Care

Restroom Care: Improving Touchless Technology

Will touch-free technology bring us a germ-free restroom?

By Maureen Badding
 Email the HS editors

Who doesn't love a touchless restroom? Automatic fixtures always leave a good impression with building occupants because they're perceived as convenient, high-tech and sanitary, while property managers love them because they reduce clean-up time and control costs through portion control. More importantly, though, everyone loves how touchless fixtures prevent cross-contamination. Or do they?

It is common for many restrooms in high-traffic facilities to feature automatic toilets, faucets and soap and towel dispensers. While each individual component prevents cross-contamination, there are weak links in this chain of automated sanitation. Getting out the bathroom door without coming in contact with germs is a problem that's only recently been addressed. And what about the stall door?

Evolution Brings Economy

Consider how much the touchless industry has progressed in the past decade. We've evolved from a time when hands-free flushing meant using your foot, to an era where many toilets and urinals flush automatically.

The next great product development wave brought us touch-free faucets, followed by automated soap and towel dispensers. Sales of each have skyrocketed, with most manufacturers seeing touch-free sales far outpacing sales of mechanical fixtures.

"Patrons like no-touch dispensers. If you know a place has clean, maintained restrooms, your assessment of that business goes up," says Dale Sturgess, dispenser category manager for [SCA Tissue](#) in Neenah, Wis.

While patrons are enthusiastic, property owners were slower to buy in to touchless technology. "Some

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facility managers have questioned the upfront cost of automated dispensers, but the savings — especially in reduced paper use and the time needed for maintenance and refills — significantly outweighs those costs,” says Bill Sleeper, president of **Georgia-Pacific’s** North American Commercial Business — Washroom Solutions and Wipers in Atlanta.

Industry experts admit, though, that early sensors were “hit or miss” and caused hesitation among property owners. Thankfully, technology has greatly improved so that misfires — such as flushing at the wrong moment or not flushing at all — have been reduced considerably.

Better sensor technology has also given rise to aesthetic improvements; wires no longer need to be encased on the top of the faucet unit, for example. Newer units boast greater installation flexibility and have no design limitations.

“[Touchless] is a cost-effective upgrade,” says Jerry McDermott, executive vice president of **Technical Concepts**, Mundelein, Ill. “It’s a lot easier to upgrade the faucets and soap dispensers and put in a new countertop than to change the tile. And it makes a big difference in the restroom’s appearance.”

But the biggest thing driving touchless faucet sales is water savings. According to McDermott, “These products can conserve about 70 percent of water. With the rising cost of utilities, the faucets pay for themselves in anywhere from 18 months to three years, then continue to save.”

Cross-contamination Fears Fuel Sales

There’s a different perspective on touch-free at **Kruger Products**, Toronto, which was hit hard by a SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak in 2003.

“The driving factor is hygiene, not cost,” says Director of Marketing Markham Ray. “Germs can live on hard surfaces for anywhere from 24 to 48 hours.”

Ray has seen the touch-free market take off with the threat of avian flu, SARS, drug-resistant bacteria and Norwalk viruses on cruise ships. “If there’s a price to be paid for touchless, the market is willing to pay it.”

As the market demands more germ-reduction technology, manufacturers will continue to develop components that, to date, have generally not been touch-free: the toilet seat, toilet tissue, stall door and the bathroom door itself.

Kimberly-Clark Professional, Roswell, Ga., has just introduced the first electronic bath tissue dispenser. When properly installed, the unit is ADA compliant, automatically dispensing a pre-measured amount of toilet paper when it senses a hand under the dispenser. K-C predicts a 20 percent reduction in the amount of paper used with the new dispenser.

Getting out of the stall touch free continues to be a challenge, but some feel it’s not as serious as it sounds. SCA’s Sturgess suggests that the key to eliminating cross-contamination is a good hand-washing regimen with soap and hot water, which occurs after you’ve left the stall.

“Once your hands are clean, if you don’t touch anything else, you’re OK,” he says.

Dry hands are safe hands, says Ray, “so a good quality paper towel is one of the best ways to prevent cross-contamination.” Often the additional cost is negligible; if the patron goes back for a second or third “value-priced” towel, you’re not really saving any money, Ray adds.

Getting out of the restroom without contaminating clean hands is literally the last barrier.

"In many high traffic areas, the "S" door is becoming popular," notes Mark Stanland, director of marketing for [Wausau Paper.](#), Harrodsburg, Ky. "This allows patrons to further reduce contact with bacteria, with the elimination of touching doors and/or knobs."

Operators of older restrooms, on the other hand, have a couple of options. Georgia-Pacific, for example, has developed a door tissue dispenser and trash receptacle that can be mounted right next to the door.

Solutions for the Future

Industry reps anticipate that market demand will help touch-free technology evolve in three different areas: easier maintenance, environmental impact and inventory technology.

Maintenance is already less of an issue with touch-free systems because, as McDermott puts it, "When you don't have people touching them, they last longer."

There is a lingering perception among building managers, however, that the touch-free systems may be too complex for maintenance staff to repair.

"New design has helped combat this," says Sturgess. "We use a cassette-based system so if there are any repair issues, components are easily replaced."

McDermott sees increased demand and competition leading to fixtures that require less maintenance. "They'll be simpler to install, more reliable and more cost effective."

Wausau's Stanland also sees an increased focus on green products. "We should see additional improvements with 'support' products, e.g., soap and toweling, that promote environmental responsibility."

Soap and toweling aren't the biggest threat to the environment, however. Although the option to hard-wire touch-free fixtures is available, most of them are run on batteries.

"In some of the larger facilities, property managers are concerned about battery disposal — they need to be disposed of in an environmentally sensitive and cost effective manner," says Ray. For that reason, he expects there will always be demand for mechanical touchless systems.

Sturgess agrees. "In its simplest form, a multifold or center feed towel is a touch-free system."

But, the future may bring intelligent restrooms as well. "We believe facility managers will want automated products to feed usage data back to a central system so they can monitor use," says Georgia-Pacific's Sleeper. "These systems would eliminate the need for staff to make rounds, allowing them to focus on problem points."

Imagine, a soap dispenser that sends your staff a message when it needs a refill. Or better yet, knowing the toilet tissue needs replenishing before an angry patron complains.

Maureen Badding is a freelance writer based in Milwaukee, Wis.