

BY JAY FISKE

President,
Powerhouse Dynamics

Safe & SUSTAINABLE

Optimizing facilities in the “new normal.”

Facilities managers responsible for dozens of restaurant or retail sites have always needed “multiple pairs of eyes” to ensure every location is operating optimally. Now, the need is more acute with staff shortages. When wait staff or store managers are working double duty to please every customer, it’s easy for them to forget about other tasks — from turning down the air conditioning to switching off the lights or sanitizing every surface.

Those small details, over time, can lead to wasted energy, excessive fuel charges, or even (worst case) customers falling ill after eating at their favorite restaurant. As mask mandates are eliminated and consumers travel and spend again, facilities managers can reduce these risks and help bring their enterprises to full strength.

How do they accomplish this, given all the details they need to keep an eye on across a whole portfolio?

It’s well known that COVID-19 has led the restaurant and retail industries to evolve their products and services using technology. Solutions such as the Internet of Things (IoT) have also helped them manage and control facility operations despite challenging circumstances. Some major multi-unit brands started well before the pandemic began and have saved tens of millions of dollars as a result. Their experiences are leading other facilities managers to implement them too.

How do these technologies work? Restaurants and retailers are using them to connect with (digitally or through sensors), monitor and control their equipment from their phones or tablets

— including HVAC, lights, irrigation systems, dishwashers, freezers, refrigerators and fryers. Once they’ve made these connections, they’re finding multiple ways to improve health and safety, service, energy consumption and sustainability, such as the following examples:

PREVENTING FOOD-BORNE ILLNESS

One safety-conscious dining concept connected their ovens and immediately received an alert that their food wasn’t heating to the right temperature. The ovens were in good shape, but management took a deeper look due to the alert. The problem was that in one location, proteins were inadvertently going into the oven before they were fully defrosted. Not only did the alerts help them prevent the food from being eaten, they also ensured that the mistake would never happen again.

AUTOMATING FOOD SAFETY REPORTING

In the heat of the moment with a demanding customer, will restaurant staff remember to check and regularly record equipment temperatures? IoT is helping

to remove that need and making portions of HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points) food safety reporting more effective and efficient. One brand, for example, shaved 15 minutes from the process of tracking refrigerator and food temperatures from 17 to just 2. This is helping restaurants to streamline audit preparation, as well.

CONSERVING ENERGY AND UTILITIES; REDUCING COSTS

Facility managers can navigate the “quadruple threat” of high energy costs, supply chain pressures, inflation and climate change — but only if they can plug emerging “leaks” in time. IoT is helping them to do this in numerous ways.

For example, during the sizzling summer season, retail or restaurant staff might be tempted to turn all their air conditioners on full blast throughout the day. Not only may this be unnecessary for customers’ and employees’ comfort, but it can also subject them to the high demand rates some utilities charge. Facilities management can pre-program their HVAC systems to avoid this by staggering equipment usage.

Another application is fixing equipment before it breaks or amps up even more costs. For instance, a retailer identified a malfunctioning switch in a new air conditioning unit that was always on. That enabled them to make repairs before energy usage got out of control.

Imagine a multi-unit restaurant brand known for seasonal favorites, such as fried clams in New England. By noticing how

long fryers take to heat up, facility managers can identify equipment that isn’t performing at its peak. This can preempt breakdowns that could lead to restaurants’ inability to serve their signature foods (like those fried clams) when customers most want them. Moreover, replacing equipment is often much costlier than repairing it — and the benefit of keeping it out of landfills is compelling. Then there is the astonishing cost of vegetable oil right now; being able to conserve this precious resource is important. Finally, preventing extra truck rolls by field technicians for unexpected repairs reduces gas emissions. Restaurants win on many levels.

CLEANING INDOOR AIR

Being able to reassure customers and team members that their health and safety are priorities is a competitive advantage in this COVID-19 era. Some multi-unit concepts are making this easier through automation. They’re integrating their HVAC equipment with ultraviolet (UV) technology that kills 99.9995% of airborne viruses, including the virus causing COVID-19. Then, they program the HVAC equipment remotely to activate the technology regularly.

For facilities managers expected to “do it all,” this kind of technology can relieve stress and empower improved performance. As staffing challenges continue, it can give them the extra eyes and ears they need. ■

Jay Fiske is president of Newton, Massachusetts-based Powerhouse Dynamics, a leading provider of Internet of Things (IoT) solutions for multi-unit restaurants and retailers. Contact him at jay@powerhousedynamics.com.