Creating Healthy Facilities for Museum Guests

By Richard Kennedy, ABM Business Development Manager– PA, NJ, DE

COVID-19 has forced museum operators to confront the difficult decision to keep their doors closed and continue to lose revenue or reopen and address the safety issues caused by the pandemic. Making the decision to reopen comes with a number of challenges, with guest and employee safety being at the top of the list. While facility managers in office environments, restaurants, and retail shops can focus on protecting occupants, museum operators have to also protect the objects they display. Implementing long-term solutions is key to giving guests peace of mind and preserving the valuable exhibits they come to see.

Shifting Perspectives on Cleaning

Cleanliness has always been an important part of creating a positive guest experience. Cleaning programs traditionally centered on aesthetics and preservation of the facility. But now it's important to consider occupant health as well. How can you adopt cleaning practices that reduce the spread of pathogens and still provide a positive guest experience?

Fortunately, the shift in guest perspectives and behaviors works in your favor. The more visible your cleaning program, the more attractive your museum will be for guests who are concerned about their safety. In the past, cleaning personnel typically worked out of sight. Guests could see the outcome of their work, but not the actual cleaning in progress. Now, guests will likely be comforted by the sight of cleaning personnel during business hours. Placing hand sanitizing stations and wipes throughout the facility also indicate to guests that you're taking facility wellness seriously.

Consider the Needs of Every Environment

Disinfection programs should be implemented in any area where people go. Guests may frequent the exhibition areas, lobbies, restrooms, theaters, and elevators. But it's important not to neglect the offices, loading docks, and storage areas that employees use. It's worthwhile to take a moment to assess your facility to take stock of high touch-points and common occupancy levels, and determine the appropriate intervals for disinfection. A vendor experienced in museum facility services can help you manage the challenges of implementing a comprehensive approach.

Protecting the Valuables

Museums are challenged with protecting artwork, historic items, and interactive elements while also addressing the need for disinfection. Many disinfection programs include electrostatic spraying, which involves charging liquid disinfectants as they're dispersed so they stick to surfaces. Electrostatic spraying supplements surface cleaning to disinfect areas that traditional cleaning can't reach. While surface cleaning may focus on a desk area, file cabinet handles, and chair arms, electrostatic spraying will cover the nooks and crannies of the chair and items on the desks that can't be wiped down.

Before implementing electrostatic spraying in museums, particularly in exhibition areas, it's important to assess whether it will cause harm to the objects on display. Museums with interactive exhibits need to consider the compatibility of chemicals and the surfaces upon which they'll be used. Interactive elements are high touch-points and need to be disinfected regularly. But if disinfectants can damage them, or the structure isn't conducive to being thoroughly disinfected (such as an exhibit you can stand inside of), you may need to restrict access or remove those items from the exhibition area.

Air Quality Also Matters

Creating healthy buildings isn't just about high touch-points and social distancing. The Centers for Disease Control recently updated its guidance to reflect that COVID-19 can be spread through droplets that linger in the air.1 The risk is higher in small, enclosed spaces. Taking steps to improve ventilation can help reduce the spread of pathogens. Just like with cleaning, conversations around HVAC improvement are typically focused on occupant comfort and protecting the exhibits. Now you must expand your focus to include health concerns as well.

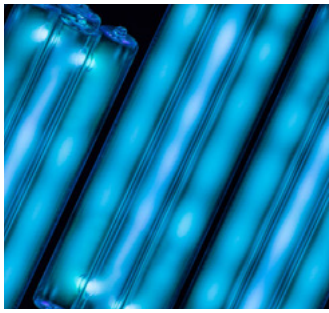
To help understand your options and prioritize your response, consider undertaking a professional analysis. The analysis can help you understand the capabilities of your HVAC system and which measures you can take to improve indoor air quality (IAQ). The first step is to assess your current maintenance protocols by asking questions like:

- Are your controls working effectively?
- Are you bringing in the right amount of outside air?
- Are filters being changed frequently enough?
- Are there any leaks in the system?

Answering these basic questions can help you make immediate changes to ensure that your HVAC system supports healthy IAQ. Beyond the basics, COVID-19 has prompted increased interest in highly efficient particle filtration (HEPA) filters. However, not every HVAC system is equipped to handle these filters. If you want to pursue this option, you'll need to assess whether your HVAC system can handle the air pressure they require.

New Technology to Consider

Outside of cleaning protocols and HVAC maintenance, new technologies are available for organizations that really want to amplify their disinfection efforts. The pandemic has generated a lot of attention for new technologies that improve facility health. UV light and bipolar ionization are two examples of emerging technology that are increasingly popular.



UV light is the most well-known of the two. If you've seen one in action, it likely was a UV light mounted to a fixture to clean hospital rooms or government buildings. Another method of using UV light is to install it in places in the HVAC system where pathogens are most likely to grow. UV light is effective, but can be harmful to the skin and eyes, and requires specialized training to implement and service.

Bipolar ionization works by injecting electrically charged oxygen ions into the air via the HVAC system. These ions deactivate harmful airborne substances and attach to droplets and particles so that filters can capture them more easily. Bipolar ionization requires less maintenance and specialization than UV light technology. However, it can release harmful ozone particles in some instances. Each system must be vetted to ensure that it's safe for occupants.

Navigating the Costs

There's no way around it. Implementing any of these solutions costs money. The increased costs couldn't come at a worse time, with budgets stretched thin. But the investment can lead to greater confidence among guests that your facility is safe to visit. Also, some facility service partners can help you identify unique funding options for upgrades or implement strategies that use labor as efficiently as possible.

It will be a long time before museums begin hosting busloads of students during the day and galas in the evening again. Implementing these changes now can help you brace for the eventual return to normal operations later. As an added benefit, many of these improvements will improve the guest experience, even after the pandemic is over.

Sources

1 https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html

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Rich currently holds the position of Business Development Manager for NJ, PA and DE at ABM. Rich took on this role in 2014. Rich previously held the role of Branch Manager at ABM from 2012-2014. Rich originally joined ABM in 1987 as a Project Manager. Rich has held both operations and sales management positions in ABM's Mid Atlantic and Northeast Regions for over 30 years.

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