

CMM Contractors Success

Sanitary Napkin Disposal Concerns

Water and public works department Web sites of cities large and small across the United States often include advisories that suggest ways water customers can avoid water back-up problems and prevent blockages and other sewer-related issues. Although each department may have some specific recommendations, it appears that one item is suggested over and over again: to protect sewers and avoid plumbing problems, do not flush sanitary napkins down toilets.

Repeatedly, these Web sites indicate that flushing sanitary napkins, along with disposable diapers—the next biggest culprit—are the two major causes for water line backups. One town Web site goes as far as to say, “Never put sanitary napkins down the toilet *even if the labels indicate that you can do so* (italics provided by the town’s Web site). These were not meant to be disposed of in this manner and besides stopping up lines, you could damage your plumbing system.”

Not to mention, if the sewer is blocked, the costs to repair it can be steep -- and can fall on property owners if they are at fault. This town even recommends that property owners “carry specific insurance that covers the costs and damages related to sewage backups as a result of improper sanitary napkin disposal.”

Additionally, when feminine hygiene products and sanitary napkins are flushed down the toilet, they can pollute streams and rivers, cause hormonal changes in wildlife, and enable harmful organisms to enter the food chain. And even though some manufacturers claim their napkins are soluble (will disintegrate), most are only partially effective at best.

Sanitary napkin disposal is just one problem associated with this product, which is found in public restrooms throughout the country. As the jansan industry becomes much more hygiene focused—and as restroom users become much more concerned about germs, bacteria, and overall cleanliness and sanitation, especially in restrooms—feminine hygiene product disposal is gaining closer scrutiny.

Fortunately, often when a problem materializes, it also results in new opportunities as astute entrepreneurs look for ways to address it. In this case, dealing with the safe and sanitary disposal of feminine hygiene products offers the wise building service contractor business (BSC) opportunities that may be well-worth looking into.

Hygiene Issues

The first disposable sanitary napkins were developed in 1895, by the same companies that made thick, heavy bandages typically used in hospital settings. Frequently made of a cotton wool, they were later redesigned, using a thick cloth, which proved to be more dependable. By the 1980s, more ergonomically designed napkins were developed that were not as thick, more comfortable to wear, and more absorbent and effective.

“However, to call them sanitary is a bit of a misnomer,” says Doug Calvert, president of Cannon Hygiene, Inc., a leading global restroom hygiene service company. “Although they are sanitary when first used, because the napkin is usually worn for a long period of time, they are usually a breeding

ground for harmful bacteria or germs when it is time to dispose of them.”

Over the years, various treatments have been applied to the napkins to combat the growth of harmful bacteria, reduce odors while they are worn, and keep sanitary napkins more hygienic. However, in some cases, this has compromised comfort and caused irritation. And still today, there really is no known manufactured chemical or natural-ingredient treatment that has proven to effectively reduce or inhibit the growth of bacteria in the napkins for a prolonged period of time.

“This is why women must be sure to wash their hands thoroughly after removing sanitary napkins,” says Calvert. “And it’s why cleaning professionals must be especially careful in how they handle and dispose of them -- which is often not the case.”

Disposal Issues

According to Calvert, although more and more cleaning professionals wear gloves while performing their duties, it is still not uncommon to see cleaning workers not wearing

protective clothing. This can prove to be a serious hazard when disposing of feminine hygiene products.

“Most public restrooms still have the ‘swing top’ dispensers for feminine hygiene products that have been used for decades,” he says. “Often these do not have liners so the cleaning professional must pick them up to empty their contents -- often reaching into the container to remove some of the napkins.”

The problem with this procedure, especially if gloves are not worn, is not only are the napkins bacteria covered, but the lip of the dispenser becomes soiled and often contaminated with the potential risk of blood-borne pathogens being contacted. This can not only prove harmful to the custodial worker, but to users of the dispensers as well.

Further, Calvert does not believe these dispensers are emptied as often as they should be. “Additionally, they can accumulate in regular waste receptacles for several days,” he says. “Often it is only after an odor problem starts to develop that they are finally emptied.”

More Hygienic Alternatives

In recent years, new products and technologies have been introduced that make the disposal of feminine hygiene products and sanitary napkins safer for local water departments – and more hygienic as well. Similar to other more advanced restroom technologies, many of these products incorporate no-touch technology. Neither the user nor the custodial worker actually touches the lid to use the device or to service it.

For instance, one system has a foot-pedal that opens and closes the dispenser. And another uses infrared sensor technology to open when needed. “By eliminating touching, both systems reduce the possibility of cross contamination and are much more sanitary for the user,” says Calvert. “The units are also designed so the user never sees the other napkins that have been disposed of while an extremely effective deodorizer is released each time the unit is used as well.”

Realizing the business opportunity this can offer, some BSCs now provide restroom hygiene services to specifically maintain these dispensers. One company and their

franchises actually remove the existing unit and replaces it with a fresh one each visit. “This is really the most hygienic way to service these units,” adds Calvert. “This way all the cleaning of the unit and napkin disposal is done off site, in a much more discrete, thorough, and professional manner.”

Getting Users to Think Hygiene

Although most restroom users—according to a variety of studies—are concerned about restroom germs, bacteria, and hygiene, that does not mean they always do their part to prevent cross contamination and the spread of disease. In one study, 67 percent of the patrons in a public restroom were observed *not* washing their hands before leaving the restroom, even though hand washing has been long promoted as the best way to stop the spread of germs and bacteria.

“We have found that something as simple as installing more hygienic sanitary napkin systems makes users much more aware of the need to be hygienically responsible,” says Calvert. “Ultimately, these new no-touch technologies and restroom services can only do so much. It is up to restroom patrons to do their part to protect public health as well.”

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