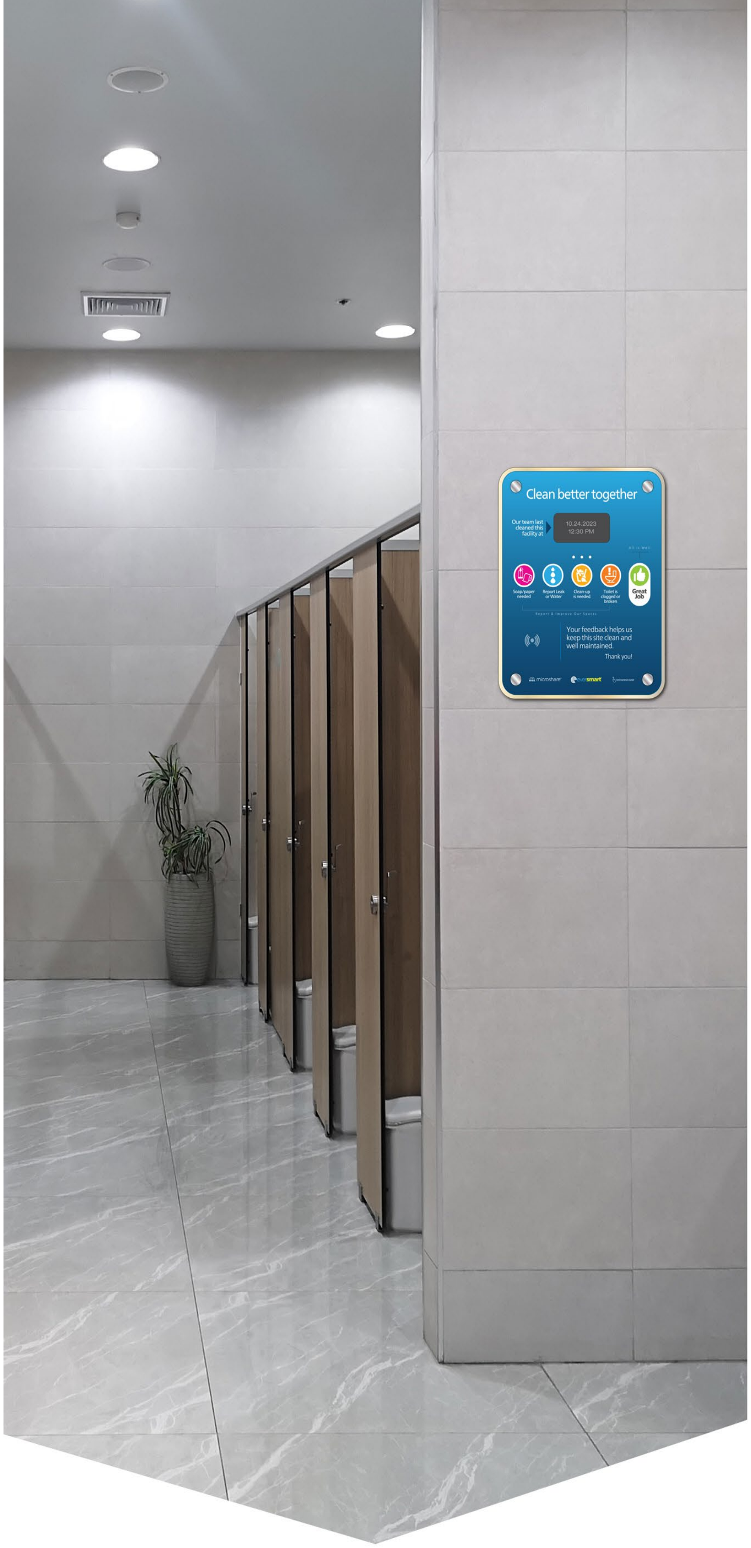

Keeping your brand out of the toilet:

The impact of clean washrooms on corporate reputation and customer loyalty

By Michael Moran and Finn Toennessen

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WHITE PAPER

Keeping your brand out of the toilet: The impact of clean washrooms on corporate reputation and customer loyalty

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Abstract
In any industry that makes washroom and toilet facilities publicly available, brand reputation and customer loyalty is directly exposed to operational failure. From large retailers to highway rest stops, hospitals to coffee chains, stadiums and hotels to supermarkets, a positive corporate reputation is paramount for attracting and retaining customers and subjecting them to an unsanitary experience of any kind risks permanent damage. Where food comes into the picture, the problem is even more acute. This white paper explores the crucial link between a company's reputation and the cleanliness of the public facilities its customers will use. Drawing on research and data from various sources, this paper highlights how restroom cleanliness affects customer perceptions and ultimately impacts business outcomes. It includes case studies, brand examples, customer surveys, statistics, and a field-tested discussion on how technology is playing a role in mitigating these risks.

Introduction

To a shocking degree, from multinational corporations to mom-and-pop shops, c-suite appreciation for the damage a dirty restroom can do to a hard-won reputation is lacking. In too many cases, the matter eludes executive attention, and thus supervisors either outsource the problem to a contractor or delegate the cleaning of public washrooms to the lowest person on the corporate totem pole, acting as if being responsible for the condition of public facing restrooms is somehow beneath them.

No similar task asked of a supervisory employee is treated with such cavalier disdain: Trash gets emptied, dress policies enforced, security routines verified, indoor temperatures monitored for optimum energy consumption and comfort. Yet ask someone ensure a dirty restroom is cleaned and the hunt will be on for anyone else to hand this chore. Somewhere in every organization, it seems, is an unfortunate soul with a bucket on wheels and a mop just begging to be scapegoated.

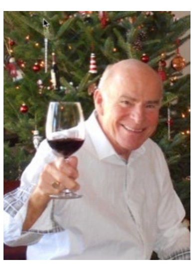
There's an old saying in the military: S*** flows downhill. Sadly, it applies here in more ways than one. In too many cases, it flows toward the most important person you'll ever interact with: The customer. In fact, in survey after survey of customers, brand managers and marketing professionals, there is strong evidence that the cleaning and servicing of your public restrooms directly impacts customer opinions of the larger brand. Does this company take public health standards seriously? Am I at risk of getting sick just being in here? Are staff the handling food or stocking shelves without washing their hands? It's not much of a leap from here to outbreaks of E.coli or salmonella outbreaks and the accompanying regulatory actions, business disruption and bad press such problems bring.

Why would an organization that spends lavishly on things like health and safety training and "key man" insurance risk the company's reputation by neglecting this simple reality? some of it comes down to enforcement, of course, across sprawling multi-jurisdictional footprints. Yet to a surprising degree, this is just mediocre management and intellectual laziness. Creating and enforcing uniform standards are not, in fact, "mission impossible," as one corporate brand manager put it to us recently. In fact, all of these challenges can be managed by prioritizing restroom cleanliness, by tweaking operational processes and by using technology to report problems and enforce responses before they become a crisis.

Proper restroom maintenance and servicing is a basic duty of care and a vital and overlooked aspect of the customer experience, known as CX in the industry. With the recent experience of a global pandemic still fresh in peoples' minds, consumers increasingly prioritize hygiene and the state of restrooms can significantly influence their overall satisfaction and peace of mind. This white paper examines the connections between restroom cleanliness and corporate reputation, utilizing real world examples of companies that got it wrong, case studies of those who learned hard lessons, and industry insights about the available change management and technologies that exist to help take a risk that is hiding in plain sight off the table.

Flush twice: It's a long way to the c-suite

A survey by the consultancy Facilities Management Advisor[i] reveals that 94% of customers consider restroom cleanliness crucial in assessing an establishment, which can impact their likelihood of returning. Clean restrooms not only reflect a business's commitment to quality but also significantly affect customer perceptions of overall service.



TJ Provost, a former culinary arts lecturer for Johnson & Wales University in Rhode Island who retired after 45 years in hospitality industry, says if a restaurant bathroom is disgusting, or the windows or curtains are filthy, he knows the kitchen isn't far behind. "If your guest sits down and consumes food and beverage then one of the most important areas within the establishment are the restrooms," he says. "Does that room influence their return? Absolutely, yes."

Corporate reputation includes stakeholder perceptions regarding a company's integrity, reliability, and commitment to service. As highlighted by a 2024 survey by Bradley Co., a fixture manufacturer, restroom reputation directly affects customer perception, influencing corporate reputation. Over 60% of 1,000 US adults surveyed said they went out of their way to find convenience store brands that they knew maintained clean restrooms.[ii] In hospitality, which includes hotels, restaurants, convenience stores, museums, sports and entertainment venues, customer experience is essential, and a dirty restroom can create a negative impression and overshadow superior service elsewhere.

What is true in hospitality holds true for other industries, too. At **Zurich Airport**, which has won air travel industry awards as the best customer experience airport in Europe for 21 years running, a decision was taken to install state-of-the-art feedback and preventative data software[iii] by Microshare to ensure its high customer satisfaction expectations are enforced.

The product Zurich chose after a public tender, Microshare's EverSmart Washroom, uses PIR motion sensors to anonymously monitor the traffic to a particular restroom to provide cleaning staff with real-time intelligence on where to concentrate cleaning resources. The product deploys a detailed feedback station that not only allows customers to register satisfaction or dissatisfaction but also report specific issues: Soap Out, Water on Floor, Toilet Clogged, Needs Paper. This is a crucial differentiator for facilities managers and brand stewards.

"This technology combined with data analytics will help increase efficiency in cleaning tasks and improve quality and employee empowerment," said Daniel Amman, the airport's head of commercial cleaning. "We not only see problems early, but can track response times of staff, too."

Case studies and real-world examples: Getting it right
It is highly unlikely any CEO or customer experience professional ever said, "I don't care about clean bathrooms. They've got their own at home." But ordaining clean washrooms from a distant corporate headquarters and making sure that certain standards are enforced has proven difficult for even some of the world's most profitable and well-respected brands.

One that, like Zurich Airport, regularly tops industry rankings for customer service is **Chick-fil-A**, the Atlanta-based food franchiser known for as much for friendly service and clean restrooms as its waffle fries. Chick-fil-A places strong emphasis on restroom cleanliness. The chain implements strict cleaning protocols and regularly trains staff on hygiene standards.

Surveys have shown that this attention to restroom cleanliness contributes significantly to customer satisfaction scores, reinforcing the brand's positive reputation and driving repeat business.

"New team members receive training covering customer service, food preparation, and cleanliness standards, in addition to ongoing skill development after they start," says Ryan Magnon, senior principal operations lead at Chick-fil-A."[iv]

Another, perhaps much more difficult bar has been cleared by **Starbucks**, the coffee chain with more than 38,000 outlets globally, each of them with public restrooms. The decision to offer public facilities goes back to the chain's initial wave of expansion in the 1990s, and in many communities in the United States, the Starbucks café is the only public restroom available. Inevitably, this leads to challenges and in some areas, from homeless seeking some relief to the extra burden on staff to service a high traffic restroom. In many cases, the chain found it had to resort to combination locks[v] to ensure customers would have access to safe, clean facilities.

Starbucks has tended to maintain positive perceptions regarding restroom cleanliness in spite of the challenges. The company has implemented user-friendly policies that encourage staff to keep restrooms clean and ensure they are well-stocked. Cleanliness reviews contribute to a higher overall customer satisfaction rating, validating the brand's commitment to customer experience. But complaints persist on social media, and the company’s restroom policies and fast-paced service metabolism seems to have those policies constantly under review.

As a result, Starbucks is investigating new technologies, including EverSmart Washroom in some of its European outlets, to help baristas and restaurant staff keep its open-door policy without causing a deterioration of café service. Once step it has not taken is to follow in the footsteps of smaller café chains who are implementing a pay-to-pee policy using Flush, a new app designed to get around US laws that prohibit pay toilets.[vi]

The benefits of getting this right cannot be understated. Particularly in an era when social media turns every person into a potential whistleblower, the same holds true for winning praise. It may be that people are more motivated to report bad rather good experiences, but the good does get reported – and the halo can be significant.

Great examples of this are US roadside rest stop and convenience store chains, which compete each year to win the kudos as the best place to make the family pit stop. Announced each year right before the summer driving season kicks in, a survey by Gas Buddy, a fuel savings app, drives significant business to the winning brands over the course of the season.

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Case studies and real-world examples: Getting it wrong

The size and profits generated by a company do not seem to be correlated with their ability to solve the dirty restroom problem. Fast-food giant **McDonald's** has issued regular public statements on the question of its restroom cleanliness and spent millions on expensive consultants. Yet McDonalds has not solved the problem. Indeed, once you're issuing statements about your filthy bathrooms, the problem has gone too far. Preventing that situation should be the goal.

McDonald's restaurant portfolio is 39,000-strong and located in 40 countries. The company has drawn criticism and official complaints regarding restroom conditions in various locations. In recent years, negative reviews on social media platforms due to unclean restrooms have proliferated, a sign both of widespread social media adoption and a diminishing tolerance for fetid restroom conditions. This reflects poorly on the brand's reputation, and its corporate leadership knows this. There is also some evidence that such issues (and McDonald's isn't the only burger chain facing this problem) leads to decreased foot traffic and customer retention.[vii]

One in three customers will leave a brand they love after just one bad experience, while 92% would completely abandon a company after two or three negative interactions.'

- PWC, 'Customer Experience is Everything: Here's How to Get It Right

Regardless of the region, it is not hard to find complaints online about filthy McDonald's restrooms. "The restrooms are dirty and disgusting," said a post on a Rome McDonald's experience on TripAdvisor, a widely used travel site.[viii] "This place should not serve food. It is extremely unhygienic to use this hand dryer and touch food right after. I hope employees wash their hands in a different, cleaner bathroom."

Meanwhile, at Hamburger Central (McDonald's Chicago headquarters), the search is on to figure out why, other than cyclical price issues, foot traffic and customer loyalty is dropping.

"Value is not limited to price, and experiential aspects like cleanliness and convenience account for about a quarter to a third of consumers' value perception," says McDonald's CEO Chris Kempczinski. He adds that McDonald's plans to improve these experiential elements to draw in customers.

Sadly, McDonald's still makes the Restaurant Business magazine "Top Five Worst Bathrooms" list[ix] in 2024, so there's work to be done. Interestingly, Chick-fil-A ties for No. 1 in the more desirable "Top Five Best Bathrooms." McDonald's should study what they're doing right in Atlanta. Interestingly, Burger King, which like all burger franchises has had its struggles with restrooms and customer experience, is testing Washroom technology in some Scandinavian outlets with an eye toward breaking the reputational doom loop.

Walmart, the retailing giant, has felt similar pain. Known more for its fabulous management of a global supply chain, Walmart has not fared as well with the public washrooms in its 10,500 stores in 19 countries. Reports from internal surveys indicate that many shoppers have opted to leave stores without making purchases due to unclean restrooms, showcasing how poor cleanliness can adversely affect sales and customer loyalty. PwC, the global consultancy,

This is particularly upsetting for retailers in light of recent academic research suggesting that "customer toilets are considered as an important store attribute and, more importantly, the use of toilets is associated with prolonged in-store time which, in turn, increases spending."[x] Maybe that will get their attention.

Cleanliness is next to …

Data from the American Cleaning Institute indicates that 75% of consumers would pay more for a service or product from a business they perceive to be clean. A survey in Britain found 97% of respondents said they would not return to an establishment with dirty restrooms.[xi] Another found that, in retail and department stores, one quarter of 1500 consumers surveyed in the US said they had left a store without making a purchase after encountering a dirty restroom, and over half said they would never return.[xii] This data underscores the financial implications of restroom cleanliness, highlighting the need for hospitality stakeholders to prioritize hygiene in their establishments.

Deploying technology solutions can significantly mitigate restroom cleanliness issues. Many hospitality brands are exploring the integration of smart cleaning technologies that ensure restrooms are regularly monitored and maintained:

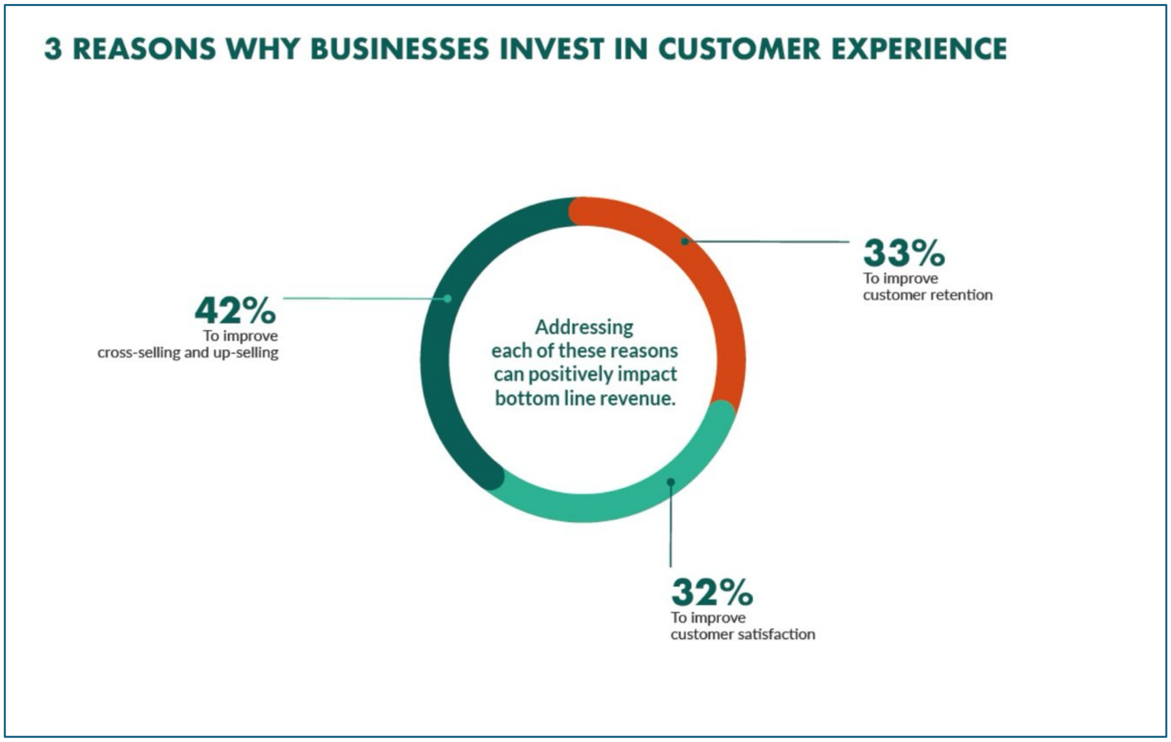
- **Sensor-Enhanced Cleaning**: Internet of Things (IoT) sensors can monitor restroom usage anonymously using Passive Infrared technology rather than invasive cameras. The data these sensors produce, when properly managed and delivered, can flag cleaning needs and potential maintenance problems in real time, allowing staff to address issues proactively. In some cases, they can prevent costly flooding, injuries or legal liabilities.

- **Automated Cleaning Solutions**: Robotic cleaners are emerging in the hospitality sector, capable of maintaining restroom hygiene more efficiently and consistently. They remain expensive and experimental at this writing, but the future clearly will involve a degree of robotic cleaning.

- **Touchless Systems**: Implementing touchless faucets, soap dispensers, toilet flushing and hand dryers can reduce contact points, enhancing the perception of cleanliness and safety, as well as bring a sustainability benefit in the form of more efficient energy and water use.

PwC, a global consultancy, notes that technology needs to be in an intimate dance with humans for it to have an impact. Technology for technology's sake "is only noticed by the consumer when it fails." Technology that enables a better customer experience, like the ability to report problems in restrooms, enhances customer satisfaction.

“Good customer experience minimizes friction, maximizes speed and efficiency and maintains a human element, embedded within the automation, AI or other technologies,” PwC reports.[xiii] “It leaves consumers feeling heard, seen and appreciated. It has a tangible impact that can be measured in dollars and cents.”



The connection between restroom cleanliness and corporate reputation is critical in the hospitality and retail sectors. As consumer awareness of cleanliness continues to rise, businesses must prioritize hygiene standards to meet expectations and protect their reputation. Case studies demonstrate that brands like Chick-fil-A and Marriott benefit from high cleanliness standards, while others, such as McDonald’s and Walmart, illustrate the consequences of neglecting restroom maintenance.

From reputation to liability

A hit to customer loyalty is not the only potential risk of getting the bathroom wrong. In the litigious United States, restaurants, hotels and retail giants have found themselves in court – often in the glare of negative publicity – and ultimately shelling out hefty financial settlements to escape judgements after complaints about poor restroom sanitation or maintenance.

McDonald’s has a long history of being targeted by lawsuits, both real and frivolous. The most famous instance, a 78-year-old woman who won a half million-dollar settlement after spilling extremely hot coffee on her lap[xiv] and suffering 3rd degree burns, has gone down in legal history. Whether real or just an effort to prize money out of a lucrative defendant, the chain has faced dozens of lawsuits over sanitation issues. In 2013, a lawsuit was filed in California after a family claimed that they contracted a serious bacterial infection from a filthy restroom at a franchise location. Another case, in Louisiana, involve a woman who fell and cracked her skull on a floor slick from a leaking toilet. Cases like this bring negative publicity and tarnish the brand's

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reputation, as consumers expect a high level of cleanliness in food service environments. Some of them, at least, are preventable – or at least, disprovable.

A Google search for “slip and falls in restaurant bathroom” reveals a cottage industry of lawyers willing to bring the alleged culprit (the restaurant) to court.[xv] The website of one attorney, Jeffrey Kestenbaum of Brooklyn, N.Y., states that “Bathrooms can be seriously dangerous places – whether they’re in a private home, rental apartment, hotel, restaurant, or other public space… a bathroom slip and fall accident could also be due to landlord negligence, hotel negligence, or restaurant negligence.”[xvi] *And I’m going to make them pay* is the unstated promise Attorney Kestenbaum doesn’t need to add.

Lawsuits regarding restroom cleanliness not only result in financial settlements but also generate negative publicity. Cases often receive coverage across multiple news outlets and social media, where public sentiment is quickly swayed by reports of unsanitary conditions influencing consumers’ decisions to patronize a business. Increased scrutiny can lead to further investigations, both by health authorities and the media, forcing companies to reevaluate their hygiene and operational protocols.

Business interruption: The other restroom risk
Looming behind a dirty restroom are an army of national, state, provincial and municipal health regulators who have the power to fine, shut down and publicly shame businesses deemed a threat to public health. Several restaurant, grocery, hotel, and hospitality groups have faced shutdowns or severe penalties from such health and safety regulators due to sanitation violations, including issues related to restrooms. Specific details about every case may vary, but there is a common theme: Filthy public restrooms failed to command the attention of business leaders from the top down to the cleaning staff, and the business as a whole (as well as its shareholders, in some cases) paid the price. Here are some notable, very recent examples:

- **Holiday Inn in Elk Grove, Calif:** In October 2024, California health inspectors shut down a Holiday Inn hotel near Sacramento due to an inadequate supply of hot water and lack of paper towels in the employee restroom. [xvii]
- **Kroger grocery store:** In March, 2024, health inspectors in Indiana shut down a store from the giant Kroger chain after violations were found in the restrooms including mice droppings and unsanitary conditions.
- **Popeye’s:** A Pittsburgh, Penn., area outlet of the popular fried chicken chain was closed by county health inspectors for unspecified restroom violations.
- **Flamn Cuisine and Catering:** New York City inspectors closed this Queens business down for a raft of violations, including: “No hand washing facility in or adjacent to toilet room or within 25 feet of a food preparation, food service or ware washing area. Hand washing facility not accessible, obstructed or used for non-hand washing purposes. No hot and cold running water or water at inadequate pressure. No soap or acceptable hand-drying device.”
- **The Royal Palm Grill and Deli:** Florida officials cited 43 violations to shut down this South Florida eatery in October, 2024, including “objectionable odors in the bathroom and other areas of the restaurant.”

Consequences of Violations

The shutdowns often stem from repeat violations of health codes, which can include dirty restrooms and failure to address previously cited issues. These closures serve both as a public safety measure and a warning to the establishment and others in the industry regarding the importance of maintaining hygiene standards. Following a shutdown, businesses typically undergo thorough inspections and must implement corrective actions before being allowed to reopen.

While they may reopen relatively soon after issues are remediated, the lost revenue of the shutdown period pales next to the damage bad publicity will do. In recent years, perhaps the most famous example of this problem, which involved both poor restroom sanitation and poor food handling practices, was the crisis that nearly destroyed Chipotle Mexican Grill starting in 2015.

That year, several Chipotle locations were forced to close temporarily due to multiple health violations, including unsanitary conditions in restrooms that officials believe contributed to foodborne illness outbreaks. As outbreaks of several foodborne illnesses spread, the company's share price fell by half as the problems continued and management struggled to formulate a response.

Eventually, Chipotle agreed to pay the US Justice Department $25 million to resolve criminal charges[xviii] leveled against the company. Far more was paid in undisclosed settlements with sickened customers, and the costs incurred stemming from shuttered stores, new training regimes and physical upgrades in the chain's restaurants and the massive hit to customer loyalty have been estimated at $100 million. At the height of the crisis in 2015, the company had lost $8 billion in value as measured by its share price.

Conclusion: Embrace the risk, manage your people, tweak your processes, deploy technology

So how do we neutralize the risk posed by this seemingly mundane issue to a brand's reputation, its ability to grow sales, and to attract and retain both customers and employees? Here are a few ideas:

1. **Confront and air the problem**: The first step in tackling any challenge is admitting it's a problem. Restroom cleanliness and maintenance doesn't often show up in the CEO's shareholder meeting transcripts (I know, I checked), and yet for a number of the enormous firms cited in this paper and for many others, too, it is a serious issue that poses a drag on or at least a risk to growth. Corporate leaders have few more impactful opportunities to mobilize their entire workforce on an issue than these investor calls. It's not a topic beneath you and it is not irrelevant to the growth and performance of your company. In fact, it is your job to put such wrongheaded ideas aside and flag it as a priority. From there, it is imperative to let your direct reports – particularly those in brand management, marketing, customer experience and facilities management that you were not engaging in "bathroom humor." You are determined that the company will get restroom sanitation and maintenance right as part of a larger push to constantly improve customer experience.

2. **Examine and improve current business processes:** What is it you're doing now? From the customer up to the c-suite down, what are the touch points and responsibilities directly or indirectly related to the condition of your restrooms and the experience your customers have inside them? What data do you have to work with to measure mechanical and supply problems? What about staff responses to them? Are you measuring customer satisfaction seriously or do you just have one of those dumb smiley face things in the restroom? How many toilets clog per week? How many water leaks do you experience? Were there injuries or serious mishaps in your restrooms? All of this bears examination, and where you have no answers, you need to find them.
3. **Deploy technology to help provide visibility and enforceability:** Your people – the human capital of your company – are your most important asset. This is particularly true for staff who will interact or at least been seen by or directly impact customers. But they will need help managing things like traffic flow to know when a particular restroom is being overwhelmed, user feedback to report problems, and it doesn't hurt to implement a check-in system that logs responses to crowd-sourced maintenance or supply requests.

Technology alone will not solve this problem. It is, after all, one of the most basic human problems we've got. But technology plus a motivated, incentivized and well-trained workforce can make this problem go away. The risk will always remain – that, too, is a human thing. But by acting on this issue before it becomes a viral staple of your brand on Instagram, TikTok or Facebook, you minimize that risk and take away much of the unpredictability. What's more, you will have an answer and a plan in place when someone asks, "What if."

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