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Just Waiting...To Be Prevented

By Beth Pullin

We have all noticed surveillance cameras in retail stores, fast food restaurants, casinos and other public places. Usually we assume that they are being watched by security guards looking for thieves and pickpockets. However, many of these cameras—both those that you see and those that are hidden—are actually installed for insurance companies looking for insurance scams in the making.



The most common of these scams involves orchestrating a fall. In one fake slip-and-fall accident, a camera caught the scammer pouring a liquid from a small plastic bottle onto the floor. The individual then went back and walked over the wet area, but apparently decided that the area was not damp enough—so he poured more liquid on the floor. The scammer then delivered what can only be termed an Oscar-caliber slip-and-fall performance.

A scammer's goal, of course, is to collect "big bucks" from a store or building owner. If the incident is fake, and if it is caught on tape, obviously nothing will be awarded. However, because so many incidents are not taped, legal battles can

ensue that can cost thousands of dollars; building owners often settle such cases just to avoid paying exorbitant legal fees.

To collect on a slip-and-fall incident, a faller needs to prove that the defendant did something wrong or was responsible for the accident—for instance, in the case previously mentioned, the person would need to prove that the store did not clean up the spill in a timely manner. In many cases, cleaning services are also involved in these cases, as they are sometimes blamed for not taking adequate steps to prevent accidents.

Here are some steps facility service providers (FSPs) can take to protect themselves and, in so doing, help promote safety and prevent legitimate slips, trips and falls.

A Mat for Every Area

Slips, trips and falls are, according to a study conducted by Liberty Mutual Workplace Safety, the second leading cause of workplace injuries and accidents in the United States. According to Wausau Insurance Company, the average cost for employers of a slip-and-fall accident exceeds \$12,000.

Of course, a trip and fall can occur because a cable or cord is laid over a walkway or due to a wrinkled carpet or rug. Unless the FSP has been negligent about attending to such a situation, typically they have little control over these incidents. However, one thing they *can* do is insist that their clients install effective matting systems at all key building entries, as well as in areas that are prone to being slippery.

Slips occur where there is too little friction or traction between footwear and a walking surface, according to Christopher Tricozzi, Vice President of Sales and Marketing

for Crown Mats and Matting. One of the most common causes of this is moisture or oily substances on the walker's shoes or on the floor.

Tricozzi says that for every part of a facility, there is an appropriate mat to help prevent slips, trips and falls. This starts at the front door, where at least fifteen feet of high-performance matting should be placed; this removes as much as 80 percent of all moisture, oil and soils from shoe bottoms. Inside, Tricozzi suggests placing matting that hugs hard-surface floors in such areas as high-traffic walk ways, in front of vending machines and elevator doors, and in production areas.

Areas prone to liquid spills probably require drainage mats. These systems allow liquids and oils to seep down below the floor, keeping them away from shoe bottoms. Some of these systems have one-piece construction, while others are similar to tiles that can be locked together, forming a mat as wide and long as is needed.

Tricozzi also adds that FSPs should be aware that there are antimicrobial matting systems available; these are often used in medical and food-service facilities. The antimicrobial properties of these products inhibit the growth of microorganisms as well as help to prevent cross contamination. Microorganisms can cause safety problems should they spread to floors or become attached to shoe bottoms.

Floor Maintenance

Almost all hard-surface flooring is slip resistant when dry. However, add moisture, soil, contaminants and even some finishes and they can become dangerously slippery. For this reason, regular, if not daily, dust/damp mopping is a must.

According to Mark Cuddy, Director of Sales/East for Tornado, a leading manufacturer of professional cleaning equipment including those for industrial facilities, floor care can become very expensive for facilities with large hard-surface floor areas because this type of cleaning is so labor intensive. In an attempt to cut costs, some managers may not maintain their floors as thoroughly as is necessary to promote safety. However, FSPs can reduce the cost of floor care significantly *and* promote safety by viewing floor-care equipment as an investment in both facility safety and worker productivity.

For instance, one person using a mop and a bucket will need about eight hours to clean 5,000 square feet of flooring. This time could be reduced to just 13 minutes by using an automatic scrubber. This means that the return on investment for such equipment can be quick and significant, says Cuddy.

FSPs selecting auto scrubbers will need to consider the different types of technology available. For instance, cylindrical machines use brushes instead of the traditional rotary type systems, which can actually spread slippery soils over floors. The inward, counter-rotating brushes used by cylindrical machines penetrate floor surfaces, helping to remove deeply embedded grit and soil in order to keep the floor cleaner and more slip resistant.

Starting a “Safety Culture Club”

FSPs can do several things to help improve the safety of the facilities they maintain and to prevent slips and falls. However, the cooperation of building managers and occupants is an essential part of making any such effort a success.

One cleaning contractor in northern California found a way to do this by meeting with one of his customers, a bank with 10 different locations, to help them develop a “Safety Culture Club.” Addressing the staff at each location, the contractor educated them about how and why common slip-and-fall accidents occur and what steps individuals can take to help prevent them. This includes such things as becoming aware of potential hazards within the building and bringing them to the attention of managers and wearing footwear that adheres to floor surfaces.

With the “Safety Culture Club” in place, the bank reported a significant reduction in slip-and-fall accidents. What’s more, the contractor found that the program greatly enhanced his relationship with the customer.

Beth Pullin is a writer for the professional cleaning and building industries.