

## Pandemic push

Examining trends with hands-free fixture technology.



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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has affected many businesses around the world. In the plumbing industry, it has sparked a call for the implementation of more hands-free products in public restroom facilities. Essentially, anything that eliminates or reduces the number of surfaces the user touches cuts down the potential of cross-contamination, making hands-free technology in restrooms more of a necessity than the luxury it once was.

Before the pandemic and still to this day, about 80% of Mr. Rooter Plumbing's business is residential. In some cases, since people are spending more time in their homes, our traditional residential plumbing business has actually spiked. The commercial side, however, has taken a hit due to the pandemic, because the businesses we serve are in a predicament where they've either had no choice but to shut their doors, or customers are uncomfortable visiting them in their physical locations.

We realized we had a duty to help commercial clients create business spaces that would make their patrons feel as safe as possible, and an important aspect of that is having hygienic public facilities.

But touch-free technology has plenty of other benefits in addition to increased hygiene, and we made it our mission to make this innovative technology a core piece of our commercial plumbing business and to provide hygienic, sustainable and user- and facility maintenance-friendly solutions in order to help these businesses.

## Turning mission into action

Upon recognizing the heightened need for hands-free, hygienic restrooms, we knew that it was time to enhance our services to make this type of technology a priority for our commercial plumbing services. And while we know there are some residential customers with growing interest in hands-free plumbing technology in their own homes, the demand is much more significant and the projects are larger and more long-term on the commercial side of our business.

Since hands-free plumbing is a relatively new innovation, we found it essential to team up with a manufacturer that could help us not only gain a deeper understanding of the advanced technology, but who could also be a consistent resource to use in terms of training and maintenance.

After meeting with and researching a number of different potential providers, Mr. Rooter Plumbing teamed up with Sloan. Working with Sloan increased accessibility to new products and technology. So far, we've benefitted from their direction and ongoing support for installation and maintenance of their products.

## What to look for and how to deliver

Public restrooms are crawling with germs, with some areas being more infested than others. While this should come as no surprise to anyone, the actual germ counts are alarming when it comes to the items we interact with most in a public restroom, including:

- Toilet handles (107 germs per 10 square centimeter);
- Doorknobs (257 germs per 10 square centimeter);
- Countertop items (4,590 germs per 10 square centimeter); and
- Faucet handles (17,976 per 10 square centimeter).

So, when our service professionals come onsite to a business to review their restroom facilities, they're focused primarily on these especially germ-prone areas while they look for two key factors: Are the facilities hands-free already, and are they functional? After thoroughly reviewing what a business has to offer its patrons in terms of hygienic restrooms, service professionals form their solutions by plotting out what needs to be done using a point system on how the business can modernize its facilities to a fully functional, hands-free setup.

We prioritize hands-free installations for those areas that incur the highest germ counts. Among the hands-free technology we install most often are sensor-activated flush valves, faucets and soap and towel dispensers.

We also provide the option of adding foot pulls on doors, eliminating the need for people to physically touch the restroom's main doorknob. A majority of them are either battery-operated or require very little in terms of hardwiring into an existing space.

## **Technology investment adds long-term value to businesses**

The trend of hands-free restrooms is largely fueled by the desire of business owners to focus on what's important: Running their business. Fortunately, investing in touchless restroom technology will likely benefit business owners even beyond the pandemic.

While hygiene is the first benefit that tends to come to mind when considering touch-free technology — especially given the current environment — it isn't the only benefit. Touch-free faucets use significantly less water than manual faucets. In fact, battery-powered and other sensor faucets provide water usage savings of up to 32%, while the most efficient sensor faucets save 54% of water usage compared to other faucets. These water and energy savings over a faucet's lifespan can drastically reduce a facility's water and wastewater bills, helping to achieve sustainability LEED objectives.

## **Trend to watch: Anti-scald fixture technology**

A recent trend in sensor-operated faucets is anti-scald technology to provide a pleasant handwashing experience for guests. New anti-scald-enabled faucets offer fast and effective ASSE 1070-compliant technology to deliver a desired temperature even with a cold water failure. This is especially important in facilities such as schools, hospitals and eldercare facilities.

Sensor-operated technology also helps facility maintenance teams behind the scenes, enabling them to adjust settings wirelessly without having to perform below-deck work for faucets. Instead, thanks to Bluetooth-connected fixtures and the Internet of Things, facility managers are able to select features such as on-demand or metered activation, set faucet timeouts, measure and report water usage and much more — all from a mobile app.

Upgrading restrooms to be hands-free adds exponential value for business owners, and plumbing franchises have the mass infrastructure and support necessary to provide businesses with these upgrades and the promotional materials that will help them bring in more customers. Ultimately, if the hands-free services we're providing are helping business owners keep their doors open and customers coming through, then we as plumbers are playing a role in stimulating the economy. The time is now to invest in hands-free technology for commercial plumbing.

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