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UP CLOSE: CROSS CONTAMINATION

Fighting The Flu

During the flu season, distributors will need to keep cross-contamination products well-stocked

By Cynthia Kincaid,
Email the SM editors

With flu season approaching, now is a good time for jan/san distributors to raise awareness in helping customers understand all the products and services available to combat cold and influenza germs.

"People start to think about it a little more intensely when flu breaks out," says Joe Ellis, sales representative for Lansing, Mich.-based Lansing Sanitary Supply. "We have quite a few customers who are proactive, but it will usually take one or two outbreaks of the flu before people will finally start to think about a cleaning program. They don't usually make a decision until they actually see firsthand that the flu could be a threat to their facility."

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While most customers are mindful of the upcoming flu season and keep up on infection control, they still need to be reminded of the cleaning products and systems available to them, says Ellis.

"From our standpoint, it's good to get them thinking budget-wise about how they can fit extra products in to help out with the flu," he says.

Hand sanitizers, soaps, disinfectants and other infection control products will all be in higher demand during the fall and winter seasons. Distributors will need to ensure these products remain in stock.

Market Needs

All markets are concerned with flu season and try to protect themselves by using standard cleaning products and procedures. Schools usually take a proactive approach early on, says Ellis.

"The schools are definitely concerned with flu viruses that could be a potential threat to them," he says.

Parents are especially interested in the cleaners and disinfectants being used in their children's facilities.

"Parents are starting to get more concerned about the cleaning procedures, so we send them to Web sites of cleaning products so that they can see the kill claims that

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their schools are using," says Jim Traudt, vice president of sales for Milwaukee-based Right Choice Janitorial Supply. "We relate this to the flu season because it's all about the germs."

Customers should become more knowledgeable about cleaning products, so that they have informative explanations for parents, says Traudt.

"We tell the schools that we are working with to get in front of this before the parents get to you," he says. "If parents come to you and ask you how you are cleaning the place, you can show them how you are cleaning and the types of products you are using."

Daycare facilities are even stepping up germ defense during flu season by implementing hand sanitizing dispensers.

"We had a daycare center call wanting to install a hand sanitizing station at their entry door, so that when kids come in from playing they can sanitize their hands," says Dan Ellis, general manager of Juniper Paper & Supply, Bend, Ore. "People are concerned. They want to prevent the spread of germs."

Healthcare facilities and Class A office buildings are also very aware of the transmission of flu viruses and tend to take extra precautions, especially the higher end facilities.

"They have a higher grade of clientele, and they get bigger rents for the space, so they can afford to put additional products in the bathrooms and offices," says John Ambrosini, vice president of Capital Supply Co., New York.

Hospitality facilities, too, realize how easily germs can spread and try to protect the health of their guests.

"Front counter staff need hand sanitizers because they're dealing with the general public all the time," says Dan Ellis. "Whether it's handling currency or credit cards, even shaking hands, the staff needs to be protected, so that's a focal point for us."

Securing Supplies

Given that the flu can be unpredictable in its severity, and the flu vaccine can sometimes miss the mark in fully protecting the public, distributors will do well to take extra precautions in securing inventory and supplies ahead of time. Most have plenty of inventory on hand and have systems set up that allows the shipment of new supplies within a day or two.

"I work closely with a number of our soap suppliers, and the pipeline for hand soaps and hand sanitizers is pretty fluid," says Dan Ellis.

Having enough supplies on hand, without over ordering, can be tricky, says Joe Ellis.

"You don't want to overstock your shelves, yet you still want to make sure you have a good supply for what you need," he says. "No one can read the future of whether the flu is going to hit hard or not, but you've got to be prepared with a couple of different lines of products."

Still, he cautions against overstocking because the flu might not break out in a big way.

"From a purchasing standpoint, we're not stocking up too differently from usual," says Joe Ellis. "If there's any chance of us running out, we have many outlets of getting products overnight or within a couple of days, so our customers won't be going without for more than a day."

The tight economy is also playing a more significant role in customer ordering and product use.

"We have to manage awareness, and for right now, in a situation where the economy is tight, more people are concerned with economizing," says Dan Ellis. "So if we can show them a soap that is going to save them money, and it has the extra added benefit of fighting the flu, then it's a plus."

Training has also been an important component for customers using products during cold and flu season.

"We are always promoting cleaning for health," says Traudt. "We promote training in the proper

way to clean up, making sure, for instance, that spray disinfectants go around areas and then are wiped off later, so that it has dwell time."

Make sure customers are completely comfortable with the products they are using and understand how effective they can be if used properly.

"We tell them to take a proactive approach and be mindful of having a good cleaning process," says Joe Ellis. "If they do have an outbreak, we want to make sure they have the right kind of cleaning products, the right training, and the right people to take the right steps to get rid of the viruses."

Last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported a fairly mild flu season, despite the vaccine mostly missing the mark in protecting people. Still, on average, the flu kills more than 36,000 people a year. In years when the flu outbreak is more severe, the media tends to fan the flames, which can help boost awareness, and sales, of infection control products.

"Once the flu [reports] get into the media, we definitely hear about it and we sell quite a bit more product," says Ambrosini. "Last year, they made the wrong choice for the flu vaccine, and it brought everything to the forefront."

Keep In Touch

Customer communication has always been a centralized theme for supply companies that want to stay competitive. During flu season, that communication is even more important.

"We keep in touch with our customers to see exactly what's going on with their specific situation," says Joe Ellis. "Our best approach is to keep communicating with our customers about how many outbreaks they've had in their schools, or other facilities, and then taking a proactive approach in making sure that they are aware of all the disinfectants and on-site training that we offer."

This constant contact with customers can make the difference between having a short-lived or long-term relationship over the long haul, which can translate into thousands of dollars in extra revenue.

"You'll know more about the specific situation of your account by actually being there once or twice a week and making phone calls to that facility manager to see what exactly is going on," says Joe Ellis. "Then you can tailor each account for each situation as to how you think it needs to be handled."

Ultimately, with influenza, it's never too early to get customers thinking about developing an effective cleaning and disinfecting process for their facility and communicating all the products and services that are available.

"It's always good to start talking about it right now, so that people can start thinking about it," says Joe Ellis.

Cynthia Kincaid is a freelance writer based in Portland, Ore.

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