



Inside the Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning Industry

by Allison Hester, Editor

photo courtesy of PowerWash.com

The kitchen exhaust cleaning (KEC) industry – like most pressure washing specialties – seems to be separated into two primary types of contractors – those who make a dedicated effort to be professional, keeping up to date on training, technology and certifications, and those who are out to make a quick buck. What makes this industry unique, however, is that it can be a life and death difference.

“Kitchen exhaust cleaning is directly tied to fire, health and safety,” explained 25-year industry veteran Michael Tessaro, Centex Pressure Washing Services in San Marcos, TX. “If commercial kitchens are not properly maintained and serviced on a regular basis, the chance of fire in the grease duct system is greatly increased. A fire in the kitchen exhaust system can devastate a business through the loss of business, property and life.”

According to the U.S. Fire Administration, approximately 5,900 restaurant building fires occur in the U.S. annually, resulting in an average of 75 injuries and \$172 million in property losses. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reports that most

restaurant fires begin on kitchen cooking appliances then flare into the exhaust system. Keeping the system clean and free from combustible cooking byproducts such as oils, grease and fats, can significantly reduce the risk of fire.

“The kitchen exhaust cleaning industry is virtually invisible, except when the services are either not performed properly or not performed at all,” said newly elected president of the International Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning Association (IKECA) Jack Grace of the 55-year-old company Western Commercial Services, LLC. “Then the need for proper exhaust becomes readily apparent through the destructive aftermath of exhaust system fires.”

So before moving forward into the KEC market, it’s important to understand that this industry has some unique challenges.

1. It’s Highly Competitive: “Everyone knows someone in the KEC field that is cheaper. Everyone in the field thinks that they are the only ones who can do a good job. And many customers think the lowest price entitles them to the highest quality work,” added Grant Mogford of FlueSteam, who has been in the



photo courtesy of PowerWash.com

KEC industry for almost 22 years.

The need for KEC seems obvious – and it’s required by restaurant insurance companies – but unfortunately many restaurant owners do not understand the difference between those cleaning companies that truly understand the gravity of what they are dealing with, and those who are simply out to make a quick buck (at lowballer prices).

“It is a challenge to ask several times the price that a restaurant is already paying, but in most cases, this is what is needed to perform the work to standards in order to eliminate hazards,” Grace added. “Without the end user understanding or inspecting the work, there is much opportunity for the unscrupulous to prey upon the unsuspecting.”

There’s Increased Liability: “Although it is power washing, it is also very technical, with a high exposure and liability if you do things wrong,” said Wellman.

Grace took that concept further, explaining that “every system you touch and inspect – even if you never get the contract to clean it – becomes your responsibility if there is ever a fire in that facility. If you look at it or touch it, you need to know what you are looking and be extremely competent in your report. It is a matter of life safety.”

It’s Hard, Late-Night Work: “It’s not as easy as everyone starts off thinking it is,” added Mogford. “The long and late working hours. The going home dirty and smelling like burnt food. Dealing with night managers that are more interested in getting you out of their kitchen so they can go home, and the day managers calling you in the morning wanting to know

why you only spent three hours on their job last night.”

Finding employees can be challenging as well, according to Tessaro, who pointed out that “not everyone is suited for graveyard shift work.” And finding at least one employee is technically a must for safety purposes, since ladder work is involved.

It’s Constantly Changing: Regulations for the KEC industry are continuously evolving, and cleaning companies must stay on top of these to stay legal. “Regulations and protocols change. What was acceptable as a procedure yesterday may not be acceptable – or even legal – today,” said Tessaro.

Exhaust system technology is changing as well. “Right now, KEC is at a turning point where new technology is being brought into the field. They are turning kitchen exhaust systems into more technologically advanced operations that are not only helping with fire safety, but are also more environmentally friendly with energy conservation,” said Jason Wellman, owner of KEC Supplies and FilterShine USA. “So that’s why education is key. Don’t just learn it once and think you know everything.”

It’s Technical: According to Wellman, one of the biggest challenges KEC contractors face is learning how to clean exhaust systems, and how different types of cooking and grease impact the cleaning processes. “For example, the difference between removing vegetable oil and soybean oil are humongous. They are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Also, the kind of cooking the restaurant does impacts the cleaning. If it’s a very high-heat, flash point cooking operation (e.g., Oriental), then the grease is very hard to remove, as opposed to a burger shop that’s just doing a hamburger on the flat grill.”

Despite the challenges, however, KEC is still an appealing market to many, particularly because the restaurants’ insurance companies require cleaning, which means repeat customers.

Also, according to Wellman, there is good money to be made when done correctly. “Although it has become more competitive, there’s still definitely a huge potential market

share for anyone who is good at branding,” he said.

Getting Started

Every one of the experts interviewed for this article agreed that the best way – and perhaps the only way – to be successful in this industry is to start off working for another KEC company.

“People get online, acquire some information, and all of a sudden they are KEC ‘experts,’” said Tessaro. “This is still a hands-on industry and becoming educated a doesn’t happen overnight.”

Grace agreed, adding that training is critical. “It makes more sense to work within a successful, reputable company rather than launching a fledgling business in an industry that you do not understand. Training allows you to be truly competent.”

When looking for a potential KEC company

to work for, Grace pointed to IKECA’s website, www.IKECA.org as a resource for finding “the best and the brightest in the industry.”

Additionally, there are a number of schools available to help contractors learn the ins and outs of the industry. “I won’t endorse one school over another, but my recommendation is to get trained by someone who actually is in the KEC business and has a hands-on and proven track record,” added Tessaro.

Wellman said he felt that Power Wash University’s program, produced through PowerWash.com, was one of the best out there. “They use the Phil Ackland protocol, and their instructors definitely know what they are doing,” he added.

Finally, once a contractor has trained, s/he can become certified through groups such as IKECA. Certification has already become a requirement in some states, and

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may eventually spread nationwide. Although certification does mean more government regulation, the experts interviewed all agree that the positives of certification outweigh the negatives as long as the industry can self regulate. "Certification is good because it requires proof of knowledge, skill, experience

and testing that can be measured," said Tessaro. "It raises the standard for the industry."

Mogford agreed, concluding that "certification is very important as it requires contractors to understand there is so much more to KEC than just cleaning grease."

SPECIAL REPORT

Grease Trap Cleaning in the US Industry

A recovery for downstream clients is driving demand growth for grease trap cleaning services

Los Angeles, CA (PRWEB) April 03, 2012

Revenue for the Grease Trap Cleaning industry has declined at an annualized rate of 0.6% to \$389.8 million in the five years to 2012. In spite of this decline, the demand for grease trap cleaning is relatively stable.

Most municipalities require grease traps for commercial establishments to be cleaned regularly to prevent the buildup of fats, oils and grease (FOG), which can cause raw sewage leaks and otherwise costly maintenance of sewer systems. Nevertheless, industry demand remains closely linked with the demand for food service establishments, including fast-food restaurants and chain restaurants.

Unfortunately for industry operators, a decline in per capita disposable income during the recession caused many consumers to eat at home rather than choose a night on the town. Similarly, a decline in profit at many food service establishments caused restaurants to forgo scheduled cleaning more often. These factors reduced demand for grease trap cleaning during the recession, causing industry profit margins to decline and the number of industry enterprises to decline to 456 in the five years to 2012.

However, recent economic recovery is helping drive industry growth once again, and industry revenue is expected to increase in 2012.

According to IBISWorld industry analyst Kevin Culbert, the Grease Trap Cleaning industry has a low level of market share concentration. This is largely due to the fact that the majority of the industry's operators

service local restaurants, hotels, schools and businesses within a limited geographic scope to contain transportation expenses. Consequently, industry operators typically confine their operations on a local or regional basis, limiting the overall market share concentration of the industry. The majority of companies in the industry operate from a single facility and employs fewer than nine full-time employees.

In the five years to 2017, industry revenue is forecast to increase. Rising disposable income will lead more consumers to visit restaurants, which will ultimately cause food service establishments to invest in regular maintenance and cleaning of grease traps. Furthermore, stricter financial penalties are expected against businesses that do not properly dispose of FOGs, especially as more emphasis is placed on recycling, says Culbert.

Over the next five years, more research will be put into capturing and separating FOGs from liquid waste. This will particularly be the case for brown grease, the majority of which currently ends up in landfills. However, new technology is being explored that allows brown grease to be transformed into a variety of products, including oil and organic solids. As such, grease is expected to become more commoditized, helping to boost industry profit margins in the process.

For more information, visit IBISWorld's Grease Trap Cleaning report at www.ibisworld.com/industry/grease-trap-cleaning.html.