

Is Maintenance Really That Important?

Jerry Merola

This year more than ever, accidents and mishaps at entertainment venues seem to be catching headlines. In actuality, the number of incidents has not measurably risen but the public's awareness and concern for them has reached an all time high. On the basic level, accidents seem to be good for the media business, and when combined with activities that involve children, make for powerful news stories. We've certainly seen our fair share of headlines this year, spanning from power outages that left ride patrons stranded upside down to guests killed by failing equipment. Yes, it is possible to visit an amusement park for a day of fun only to become a statistic in on the obituary page tomorrow.

One guest injury or death is one too many. Clearly it's not good for business, but more importantly, it's not good for the public's perception of leisure entertainment. Establishing and maintaining a stress-free environment is the expectation of today's entertainment consumer. Statistically speaking, the number of injury reports is such a small fractional percentage of total guest visitation that some might consider it 'negligible'. If we were dealing with the defect rate for the manufacture of car bumpers or plastic straws I'd probably agree, but when someone's little boy or girl is involved, the tide changes abruptly.

Establishing A Prevention Plan

I'm sure most of us read these headlines and think to ourselves, 'this can't happen to me.' After all, your facility probably doesn't possess a 300 foot tall free-fall ride or a 75 mph roller coaster. But what you probably possess are electro-mechanical attractions that might, if neglected, fail without warning. I think it's fair to say that any device that moves is capable of causing injury or even death.

Can we prevent or perhaps lessen the likelihood of injury to our guests? Absolutely. But it will require a well designed safety plan that addresses what can go wrong and how to minimize it. While every facility is different, the list below creates a basic outline of areas to consider when establishing your prevention plan:

1. Segregate Your Attractions by Level of Aggressiveness. Roller coasters, go karts, and bungee jumps carry greater risks to your patrons than say, carousels or redemption games. With this in mind, extra emphasis should be placed on inspecting more aggressive attractions more frequently.
2. Follow Manufacturer's Maintenance Schedules. Just like automobiles, rides, attractions, and games each have a specific maintenance schedule that must be adhered to. If you've purchased an attraction in used condition without a maintenance log or operating manual, do contact the manufacturer to obtain an additional set of documents.
3. Maintain a Maintenance Log. With the changing of staff, maintenance has a tendency to fall through the cracks. This represents the biggest risk of all, as a breakdown in maintenance protocol has been blamed on a significant number of industry failures. Maintenance must come first. Marketing and sales become a distant second.
4. Replace Safety Devices. Just because the safety belt is still attached to the ride's frame doesn't mean that it's functioning at acceptable standards. All components, whether mechanical, electrical, or static will wear out over time. Consider the replacement of safety equipment the best marketing investment you and your facility can ever make. It may save a life.
5. Hire Appropriate Staff. When it comes to safety, staff competency is critical. The success of your safety program is only as good as the individuals that staff the front line. Safety is 50% maintenance and prevention and 50% common sense. Let's face it, some folks possess greater levels of common sense than others. Don't wait to become a statistic before incorporating solid employment practices.
6. Train and Retrain. Entertainment componentry has become increasing complex as the years go by, to the point where self-diagnostic systems are now incorporated into the operating programs. Self-diagnosis can be helpful but it does not replace the eyes and ears of a quality technician. With this in mind, every technician, no matter how skilled, should follow a continuing education program geared specifically toward the equipment operated in your facility. An individual that possesses ten years of industry experience can be considered a real asset, but without up-to-date training, can actually misinterpret the functions of newer attraction and ride systems.
7. Obtain An Independent Audit. Sometimes the best set of eyes belong to someone other than you. It's very difficult to remain impartial in an operation that is viewed by you every day. To counter this condition, consider hiring an industry

professional to conduct a safety audit within your facility. You might be amazed at what is observed. Seemingly simple issues such as a loose extension cord or unlocked electrical panel can result in horrendous injuries, and could ultimately cost you your business.

8. **Speak To Your Insurance Company.** Believe it or not, your insurer has a vested interest in making sure that your facility remains safe. Requesting a safety review from your insurer can highlight potential trouble spots, and if corrected, may actually assist in reducing your annual premiums.

9. **Heed Warnings From The Local Fire Marshal.** Most facilities are subject to annual review by the local fire inspection officer. While they may not be focused on the safety of the actual attractions, they are concerned about safe movement of patrons both in and out of the facility. Warnings issued by the fire inspector should be treated with the urgency they deserve. If exits are hampered by the accumulation of products, kiosks, games, or otherwise, each of these items should be immediately moved to restore safe passage in the area. In the event of a fire, smoke condition, or explosion within the facility, precious minutes can be lost by blocked exits.

10. **Perform a Conscience Check.** Above all, remember that no level of financial success is worth a debilitating injury or death of a guest, particularly when you have the power and authority to prevent it. Stick to the preventative maintenance schedule. Allocate sufficient resources to adequately get the job done. Make safety the number one priority.

If You Can't Prevent It, Control It

Should an accident occur within the facility, fast action and a focused sequence of steps will help to minimize the damage and potential loss of life. It's imperative to contact emergency authorities immediately. Establish a drill procedure with all staff members so that any member of the facility's staff can act swiftly in the event of emergency. Crowd control is also important. Create a region of privacy so that other guests do not interfere with the facility's safety protocol. Direct support staff to clear entranceways for emergency medical personnel and advise on-site family members (if any) of the procedures that you've undertaken. Staying calm and cool will save the day and actually help your staff to carry out their respective assignments without fear.

Of the incidents that I have read about this year, most reports indicate that on-site staff reacted quickly and effectively in rendering aide to injured guests. The more training and role-playing that is done throughout the year, the more controlled the ultimate real-life response will be. After all, your guests have bet their life on it.

[Return to top](#)
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