Throwing in the Towels

The ever-popular Brooklyn Bowl earned its LEED certification with a lot of reused materials. But hot air hand dryers blew recycled paper towels off the premises.

By Russ Klettke
When Brooklyn Bowl was LEED certified in 2011, it was the first bowling alley anywhere to achieve this designation. Its funky aesthetic—modeled after Coney Island—is an example of extreme recycling. Reconstituted truck tires make up the stage floor, while fixtures, furniture, glass space dividers, and the building itself (a former iron foundry) are repurposed and revitalized to serve this very lively place.

But in the bathrooms you won’t find recycled paper towels for hand drying. Instead, Excel Dryer’s XLERATOR® Hand Dryers use electricity to quickly dry (in as little as eight seconds) the hands of up to 3,000 people who patronize the bowling-concert-restaurant establishment on any given day. Add to that the venue’s 200 employees who, as we know, must wash their hands, and that’s some big demand.

NEW YORKERS WANT THE REAL DEAL
The common misperception of “100% recycled paper towels” is that they are somehow in an endless use-recycle-use-recycle path. The reality is that while towel content is recycled, it all ends up being hauled into the waste stream after a single use. And that’s after materials are shipped to and from the recycling facility.

A lifecycle assessment in 2009 of the XLERATOR dryer (conducted by Quantis International) looked at materials production, manufacturing, transportation, use, and end-of-life factors to see how this high-velocity air hand dryer performs relative to recycled paper towels. On a per-use basis, the air dryers were found to use 76 kilojoules of energy, about one-tenth the energy required to provide a paper towel drying (743 kilojoules).

The assessment also accounted for sources of electricity, finding that a significant advantage remains present for these modern hand dryers even when the
power comes from fossil fuel-burning plants. In the worst-case scenario—if electricity running the hand dryer is from coal-run plants while wind energy is used to produce 100% recycled paper towels—hand dryers make a 27% lower contribution to climate change than recycled paper towels.

**OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY EQUALS SUCCESS**

These are numbers that mattered to the developer-owners of Brooklyn Bowl, Peter Shapiro and Charley Ryan. Their sophisticated clientele can see past a LEED plaque on a wall to question not just how a facility is built but also how it operates.

To general manager Stephen Schwarz, it’s the operational performance that affects him every single day. “I actually used to hate air dryers,” he says. “They didn’t work.” But it’s the old dryers he’s referring to, which were much more common eight years ago when the XLERATORs were selected for the then-new facility. That impression changed when he saw how the new product performed, truly drying hands in a matter of seconds.

What continues to sell him on air dryers is that restroom traffic flow is faster while maintenance is immensely simplified. “There is a need for speed in a club,” says Schwarz. “We make sure we have enough bartenders on staff to serve our customers. The same goes for the bathrooms. No one wants to wait.” Nor do they want clogged toilets from incorrect towel disposal, an operational challenge that plagues the entertainment and hospitality industry.

The patrons at Brooklyn Bowl are indeed a study in motion. At its peak, bowlers take up all 16 lanes while restaurant patrons and concert fans fill its 3,000-person capacity hall. The facility is 100% wind-powered, with walls faced in Forest Stewardship Council–certified wood, a highly efficient HVAC system and waterproofed walls thanks to a soy-based, zero-VOC primer-sealer. The beer selection focuses on Brooklyn-made brews, the bowler’s lounge floor is made from recycled cork, and a bike rack outside accommodates at least 30 cyclists.

This is actually the second venue for Shapiro and Ryan, who created something called the **Wetlands**
Brooklyn Bowl was a gut rehab, with entirely modern electrical systems capable of serving the demands of sound systems, video monitors, and lighting for the 80,000-square-foot facility. But Gagnon says a large portion of restaurants, schools, sports facilities, and entertainment venues are in older buildings where electrical systems might be decades old. Two dryers from the Excel Dryer line—the XLERATOR and the XLERATOReco—can also operate on the 15-amp circuits found in many older buildings. What’s more—with its “no heat” technology, XLERATOReco draws 4.5 amps or less, which allows for the installation of multiple XLERATOReco units on one circuit, significantly reducing installation costs and creating a return on investment of less than one year.

An environmentally conscious public increasingly embraces recycled materials. But Brooklyn Bowl and the XLERATOR demonstrate how a rational and objective review challenges assumptions that all recycling is the greenest option. In this bowling alley, blowing hot air is the winning game. gb&d