As a conscientious restaurateur, have you ever had this nightmare? It’s Saturday night. The bar and restaurant are full of customers while others wait to be seated. A wedding reception is getting underway in the banquet room, with dinner to follow. The kitchen is humming and everything is going smoothly.

And then it happens – a sudden power outage brings everything to a standstill. Lights go dark throughout the building, with only battery-powered emergency beacons operating. Kitchen grills, fans, fryers and refrigerators shut down. In the bar, beverage dispensers, dishwashers and ice machines stop working. Cash registers and computers quit operating. As the minutes drag on, customers become restless, impatient and unhappy. Everyone tries to make the best of the situation, but it’s difficult because no one knows when – or if – the power is going to come back on.

The longer the outage persists, the greater its impact on the business. Employees are idled, customers are turned away, revenues are lost and food spoilage starts to become an issue. If power isn’t restored within a couple of hours, the expense and inconvenience begin to multiply, affecting not only customer goodwill but the bottom line as well.

Fortunately, there’s an easy and relatively inexpensive way to protect against this kind of business interruption and loss — investing in an automatic standby generator. Today’s backup power options include a wide array of natural gas models that are clean, quiet and surprisingly affordable.

When the capital cost is compared to the potential loss exposure, the economic justification for investing in standby power is compelling. Although the payback equation will vary depending upon a restaurant’s size, sales volume and electrical load, the point is obvious: protecting against power outages is a very cost-effective business decision.

“A number of restaurants in our area are reporting that their insurance companies are no longer covering losses — including food spoilage — that result from power outages,” says Mark Costis, field sales engineer at Generx Generators of Tampa, Florida. “However, some insurers are offering a discount on the annual premium for restaurants that do have backup power. Restaurant operators are realizing that this kind of protection is now essential as well as wise.”

That trend is also being noted by gas suppliers. “We have definitely seen increased interest in natural gas generators by the foodservice industry,” says Raymond Lavoie, technical support representative at TECO Partners.

Despite the affordability of standby generators, a recent survey found that more than 60% of businesses do not have a backup power plan, even though almost 80% of them experienced at least one blackout last year. Although it seems logical that restaurants in areas that are more prone to weather-related outages would have a greater need for backup power, statistics show...
that all businesses are at risk. In fact, less than 50% of all power interruptions are caused by bad weather, so the odds of a costly outage occurring are relatively high no matter where you’re located. (See chart on page 1.)

### Why Natural Gas Generators

The relatively recent advent of affordable natural gas solutions has prompted a shift away from traditional diesel generators. Gas-fueled models provide several key advantages for commercial applications like restaurants.

To start with, natural gas is supplied reliably and endlessly — even during extreme weather — so there’s never a need to refuel. Natural gas service is already available at many restaurants because of its use for cooking and heating, so adding a gas-fueled generator is easy to do. The emissions profile of natural gas engines is superior to diesel engines of comparable output, making them ideal for commercial applications where natural gas is readily available.

Unlike diesel alternatives, with natural gas gensets (generator sets) there are no fuel storage, spillage, spoilage or odor concerns. Because they use reliable, liquid-cooled automotive engines, gas-fueled generators typically cost less and run more quietly than diesel units. Certain models feature reduced speed operation during their weekly self-test routine, making them as quiet as a car running at idle.

“Before designing our line of commercial models, we surveyed the potential market to determine why so few businesses had purchased generators in the past,” says Paul Bowers, vice president of sales for Generac Power Systems. “The reason was that the negatives of diesel — cost, sound and environmental concerns — were overwhelming. Our response was to provide natural gas models that were clean, quiet, affordable and easy to install.”

### Making An Informed Decision

Before investing in a standby power system, it’s important to consider various aspects in order to make an informed purchasing decision. Consulting with a knowledgeable electrical contractor or generator dealer is important to ensure that all key aspects are properly addressed:

- Permitting
- Sizing
- Site location
- Installation

Permitting is usually routine for natural gas generators. Local ordinances vary according to municipality and may also dictate acceptable site locations, taking into account lot line setbacks, sound emission limits, etc. Local generator dealers and electrical contractors are usually well versed in these requirements.

Sizing the generator and the automatic transfer switch is important to ensure that its power output is more than sufficient to meet peak load requirements (typically 20% more to provide a cushion and accommodate possible future increases in the electrical load). A load analysis can be done in several different ways to determine the kilowatt output required to satisfy the restaurant’s power needs when in full operation. Once the load is analyzed, the proper genset and transfer switch can be selected.

A wide array of generator outputs is available, ranging from 25 to 150 kilowatts. For greater power...
requirements, a 200, 250 or 300 kW system can be configured using a pair of modular units. In this arrangement, the two generators have onboard paralleling capability that allows their output to be combined without the need for expensive and space-consuming paralleling switchgear. The dual generators also back up each other, providing built-in redundancy.

Placing the unit in the best location depends upon a number of factors, such as the configuration of the building, landscaping and parking area, as well as where gas and electric lines enter the building. In some instances, mounting the generator on the roof of the building may be feasible. Ideally, the generator would be located as near as possible to the existing utility service.

Installation and connection should be done by an electrical contractor that is familiar with generator operation, as well as local building and national electrical codes. Installation costs may vary depending upon the location of the unit, the distance required for electrical cables or gas lines, etc.

Peace of Mind — Priceless

The Keg Steakhouse & Bar in Naples, Florida is a newly remodeled business that opened in the summer of 2008. The upscale, casual restaurant encompasses 11,000 square feet and can accommodate more than 300 customers within its elegantly furnished bar, dining room and patio.

Because of the frequency of power interruptions in south Florida, owners of The Keg decided to install a 150 kilowatt natural gas generator as part of the renovation. “Our area is prone to severe weather, so outages are not uncommon,” says Steve Carroll, operating partner. “Having standby power on site ensures that we can keep operating during a blackout and continue to provide a high quality customer experience. It’s an investment that protects our business in numerous ways and provides us with real peace of mind.”

So far, there’s just been a single one-hour interruption of power since the generator was installed, but that trial was enough to prove its value to the business. “Everything functioned during the outage and our operations were unaffected,” Carroll says. “The generator really did its job.”

As part of the renovation, The Keg’s owners contacted ST Electric, a local electrical contractor that sells and installs generators. “For The Keg, we analyzed the load and presented a couple of options which resulted in them selecting a unit large enough to power the entire building,” says Steve Theriault. His firm offers a turnkey package that includes the generator, transfer switch, local permits, installation and start-up.

A number of natural gas utilities have networks of dealers or arrangements with retailers to offer automatic standby generators to their commercial customers along with referrals for installation. A wide variety of generator offerings are also available through a number of other channels:

- Generator dealers
- Electrical contractors
- Big box retailers
- HVAC dealers
- Catalog retailers
- Cooperative buying services

For today’s restaurant owner, automatic standby generators provide an easy, cost-effective solution to avoid the inconvenience and expense of utility outages. With a modest annual outlay for scheduled maintenance, a natural gas generator will provide decades of reliable power protection and priceless peace of mind.

For more information on how gas generators can help keep your restaurant open when the electricity goes out, visit www.gfen.com. For more information on Generac’s Power Systems, visit www.generac.com

The best location for a generator depends on factors such as the building configuration, landscaping, parking areas, utility service and local ordinances.