

# THE WRATH OF GRAPES

**Squashed fruit and wet floors are slip-and-fall injuries waiting to happen. But such incidents have taken a tumble in supermarkets, thanks to aggressive risk-management initiatives.**

By Bob Ingram

“We’re heading into summer, when the Killer Grapes pop out of the case and under customers’ feet,” says Scott Esqueda, safety and loss prevention manager at Grocers Insurance Group in Portland, Ore. Because of their propensity to go squishy and slippery on supermarket floors, he says, “we usually run an article in our newsletter reminding customers about the grape hazard.”

Grapes aren’t as risky as they once were, because many food retailers are bagging or shrink-wrapping them, in part to keep them off the floors and shoppers out of harm’s way. Nonetheless, says Bill Gilley, director of risk management at Wegmans Food Markets in Rochester, N.Y., customers will still break open a package to get a single bunch.

Cutting down on grape-stomping is but one of a host of risk-management moves that have dramatically lessened the incidence of customer slips and falls in the past decade, says Chuck Miller, vice president of loss prevention services at the Food Marketing Institute. Initial claims costs per 1,000 customers for the period 1994 through 1998 were down roughly 25 percent from the previous five years, Miller says, adding that slips and falls make up half the total of customer accidents.

Esqueda says he has heard of slip-and-fall settlements in the range of \$120,000, and as high as \$200,000. His company figures there are about 55,000 supermarket slip-and-fall claims annually with a total payout of more than \$110 million.

“Slips and falls remain a problem,” Miller says, “but certainly a more aggressive approach is being taken. In the last 10 years, for instance, FMI has developed a number of video training tapes that address slips and falls.” Some retailers have produced their own risk-management videos. Pathmark Stores, for exam-

ple, currently has in development a video starring company president Jim Donald, already a legend for his hilarious—and very effective—*Fish Story* training tape (SB, September 1999, page 29).

Ray Bucci, vice president of risk management at Stop & Shop Supermarket Co. in Braintree, Mass., sees the industry attack on slips and falls and other risk-management issues as a result of what he calls the “ancient history” of supermarketing. In those times, he says, “People kind of focused on those things they thought they could control and did not pay attention to those things they thought were just part of the business, so to speak.”

In the mid- to late Eighties, Bucci says, insurance became more difficult to get, and “all of a sudden insurance costs became a major part of the balance sheet, because the insurance industry had raised premiums to a level that now became obvious to senior management.”

The brass called on their risk managers, who responded with more sophisticated approaches to controlling these losses. “If you become a better risk,” Bucci says, “then you can enjoy a better rate from your underwriter. Preventing the loss is the cheapest way. The accident that never happens is the one that’s least expensive, obviously. Once a claim happens, it’s just a matter of how much it’s going to cost us.”

At Stop & Shop, and across the industry, programs were put in place that made operators more cognizant of slips and falls, and more aware of the importance of picking things up, having clean floors, and avoiding and eliminating haz-

ards wherever they were encountered.

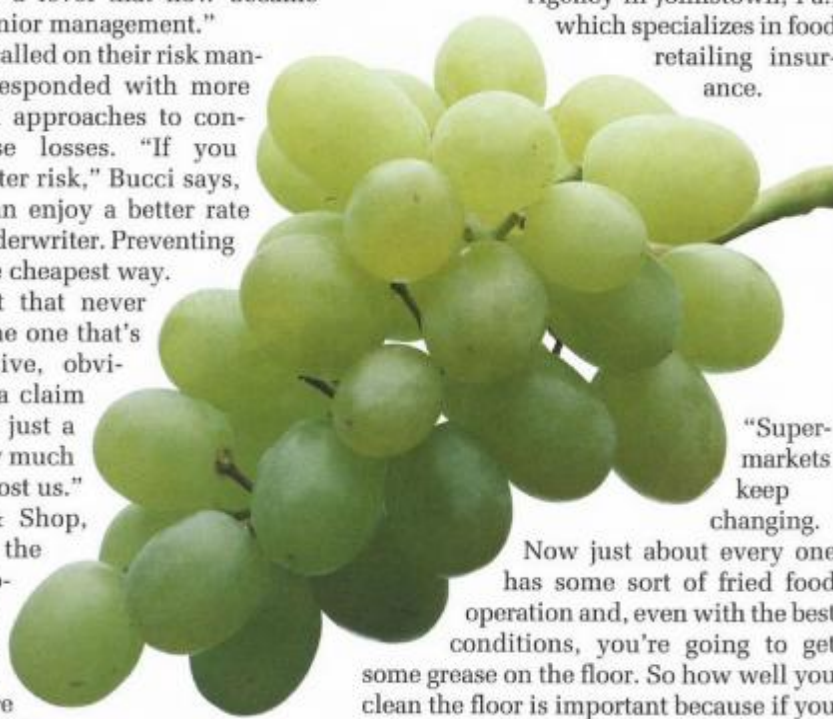
“People came at it from different directions,” Bucci says, like incentive programs that paid rewards for reduced accidents. Stop & Shop has had what he calls “caught in the act” programs that reward associates when they are spotted doing things like picking up an accident hazard from the floor. “It’s behavior modification,” Bucci says. “How often do you see somebody walk by when it takes two seconds to pick something up?”

With many supermarket managers receiving bonuses based on profits, chargebacks to their store P&Ls for customer accidents were an effective way of getting them out on the floor looking for hazards and making sure their staffs were heads-up too—or heads-down, as the case may be.

Supermarketers also took advantage of advances in the flooring industry and began using materials like non-skid tiles carpeting, and mats in high-accident areas like produce, the front end, salad bars, and frozen.

Risk management “really focused on the floors, and I think that’s continued over the years,” says Bill Rogers, vice president, risk-management services at the Gleason

Agency in Johnstown, Pa., which specializes in food retailing insurance.



“Supermarkets keep changing.

Now just about every one has some sort of fried food operation and, even with the best conditions, you’re going to get some grease on the floor. So how well you clean the floor is important because if you don’t do it well, you’re just going to be rearranging the grease.”

Rogers said Johnson’s Wax and Butcher’s make products that produce clean,

shiny floors with good traction. Betco in Toledo, Ohio, also has a line of seven floor care products to combat slips and falls.

Stop & Shop's Bucci says design can also play a part in preventing customer accident claims. "We've brought safety into the design of the store with wider aisles, brighter lighting, things that help to produce a more pleasant, safe place to shop," he observes.

FMI's Miller says some companies are using semiotics, or signs and symbols, to combat slips and falls. In addition to the mop-and-bucket cleanup kit in supermarket back rooms, there are fold-out danger signs to be put up, and Miller says he's seen small tubes that hold a collapsible, bright orange cone that can be attached to the ends of aisles warning customers off and showing spill crews the location of their target. "Spill containment is a very efficient process now," he says.

Wegmans' Gilley says, "People are more aggressive in having a spill containment program. You see that with most retailers having these little pop-up tents that you now see all over the store."

Most supermarket risk-management programs use what is called a "sweep log," both to combat slips and falls and to demonstrate the legal premise of "reasonable care," which Esqueda of Grocers Insurance defines as "taking the necessary steps to prevent something that you expect would occur unless some preventive care

is taken. Reasonable care helps demonstrate that the business owner was not negligent for the accident. Reasonable care includes a written policy, employee training, enforcement of policies, and good floor monitoring procedures."

A sweep log, according to Gleason Agency's Rogers, originally involved keeping a record of when someone would actually go around the store with a broom, removing hazards, although a broom is rarely involved today. "The problem, though, is that these things have lost credibility over the years," Rogers points out, "because everybody in claims and any attorney who's ever tried to defend one of these can tell you stories where the whole 24 hours of a sweep log was done in the same handwriting with the same pen. You can cheat on these things real easy just by sitting in the office banging it out. So sweep logs lost a lot of credibility in defending claims."

And too many lost claims drive insurance premiums up. Esqueda says that when Grocers Insurance representatives go out to train a customer on preventing slips and falls, they point out that making up a \$5,000 increase in premiums due to poor performance requires sales of \$500,000 at a profit margin of one percent.

The Gleason Agency has advanced the state of the sweep log with its GleasonESP (electronic slip/fall prevention) floor monitoring system currently used in more than 100 supermarkets. It is composed of two hand-held data retrievers, which collect store information; one exception card, which identifies hazards and documents responses; and one transmitter, which electronically relays information to Gleason's risk-management department or that of the retailer.

A customized, detailed floor plan identifies strategic placement of between 17 and 22 ID markers in a typical store. As the employee—usually the manager—walks from location to location according to a predetermined route, the data collector is touched to the location button and the date, time, location and the name of the associate are recorded. If a slip-and-fall condition is found, the employee calls for assistance, waits for the cleanup associate, and documents that a spill has been found and addressed by touching the data retriever to the proper exception card button.

Data is downloaded once a week or in the event of an incident, and management reports for each store are run weekly. Store-by-store comparisons are done weekly. Gleason chairman and CEO Robert A. Gleason Jr. says the system costs less than \$3,000 per store.

Joe Alford, director of loss prevention at Harvey's Supermarkets, a 45-store operator headquartered in Nashville, Ga., says that since mid-November his company has been using GleasonESP in the 16 stores that accounted for 88 percent of dollar losses in customer accidents.

"We're real satisfied with the return on investment," Alford says. "Truthfully, the store managers would rather not do the walks. Initially, that was just one more thing to do, but now they're seeing that when your losses are probably down 60 percent, it's putting money in their pockets because they are heavily bonused. We have implemented a charge-back system where, if they do 75 percent of their ESP walks and they have an accident, they're only charged \$3,000 for that accident. Otherwise, they're charged \$6,000."

Alford says the system forces managers to get out of the office and walk the floor, where they can interact with customers and spot merchandising opportunities.

"It's not rocket science," he says, "but it works." ■

**"The accident that never happens is the one that's least expensive."**

**—Ray Bucci  
Stop & Shop**