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POWER STRIPS AND EXTENSION CORDS

As the number of office machines increased over the last decade, many businesses faced the question of how to provide power for these devices. For many businesses, the use of extension cords and power strips was the answer of choice. They were relatively inexpensive and allowed the business owner the ability to provide power to an area in a building without necessitating the alteration of the building. However, many of these installations were not in compliance with the requirements of state statutes.

The Wisconsin Building Code has always permitted the use of extension cords for temporary use only in commercial installations. Up until about ten years ago, power strips were considered to be simple extension cords. At that time, the Wisconsin Department of Commerce gave temporary verbal permission for business owners to use power strips to power virtually any device on a permanent basis, provided that the power strip was mounted up off of the floor either on a piece of furniture or on a wall and provided that it was plugged directly into an outlet.

About two years ago, the Department of Safety and Public Services altered that policy slightly. They gave verbal permission for power strips to be left on the floor, or on a surface, unattached, provided that they were protected from damage, jostling, or spills. Otherwise, the policy remained that same.

The Department of Safety and Professional Services has codified a new position on the use of power strips and extension cords. This position is found in NFPA 1-11 and is outlined below.

Extension Cords: The use of extension cords is still permitted only on a temporary basis. This would include use on construction sites and use for seasonal displays. Such use is permitted only for portable devices which would include devices such as hand-held power tools. The cord assembly must be UL listed and the cord may not be attached to any structure. It may not penetrate any openings in the structure. Lastly, extension cords may be used for only one device at a time.

Power Strips: There have been substantial changes in the allowable use of power strips.

- They may be used for any electrical devices. However, their cords must be of equal size to that of the devices that they are powering.
- Like extension cords, they may not be attached to any structural member including walls, ceilings and floors. They may, however, be attached to or placed upon furniture.
- They must be protected from accidental damage by locating them behind or on top furniture or by attaching them to furniture.
- They may not penetrate the structure in any way. This means that the cord may not go through holes in the wall or ceiling nor may it extend through doorways or window openings.

“Chaining”: Extension cords and power strips may not be plugged one into another. Any time that an extension cord or power strip may be used it must be plugged directly into the wall outlet.

Surge Protectors: Surge protectors that are integrated into a power strip are treated as power strips and are subject to the same limitations on usage. Surge protectors that plug directly into a wall outlet are permitted in all cases.

Alternatives: Business owners may elect to have permanent wiring installed by a licensed electrician to power electrical devices or they may elect to use a power strip with a cord that will reach a wall outlet.

Copies of the Wisconsin COMM codes may be obtained from the *Wisconsin Department of Administration, Document Sales & Distribution Section, 202 South Thornton Avenue, P.O. Box 7840, Madison, WI 53707-7840* or may be downloaded from their website at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/rsb/code/>.

**If you have any questions regarding the requirements of this code as it applies to your business,
please feel free to contact one of the fire inspectors at the number listed above.**