

Simple Steps to a Sustainable Restaurant

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Reducing food and energy waste benefits the planet—and the bottom line

For restaurant operators, staying competitive requires more than great food, customer service and reasonable prices. Consumers increasingly are making dining choices based on a brand's sustainable business practices.

All else equal, consumers will gravitate toward businesses that make conscious efforts to invest in socially responsible initiatives. For example, Deloitte's 2014 Millennial Survey found that more than 80 percent of millennials believe businesses have the potential to address the growing problems of climate change and resource scarcity.

If the word "sustainability" conjures images of solar panels and rooftop green spaces, rest assured, these expensive measures are not the only methods for implementing socially responsible and sustainable practices in your restaurants. Best practices, such as maintaining a proper food inventory, reducing packaging waste and water consumption and ensuring equipment is properly maintained, can help restaurants be more efficient. On average, increasing efficiency by just 1 percent can result in a yearly saving of more than \$2,500.

Investing in sustainable technologies—including energy management systems, Energy Star-rated appliances and automated oil management systems—can also put more "green" into operations, while decreasing operational costs.

Food Waste

Food waste is a major problem in most restaurants. A 2012 study by the Food Waste Alliance found that approximately 80 billion pounds of food is discarded into U.S. landfills each year—with full-service and quick-service restaurants accounting for 37 percent of that waste.

Restaurants can implement simple solutions to cut back on these staggering statistics. When receiving supply orders, make sure deliveries meet temperature, packaging and quality standards. Order only what's needed; extra supplies waste food, space, time and money. When you have to throw away food, keep an audit log to track why it spoiled, as well as the type and amount of food discarded.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) collaborated to launch the U.S. Food Waste Challenge, a 2013 initiative calling on everyone across the food chain to join efforts to reduce, recover and recycle food waste. Their website offers multiple tools to help restaurants track the progress of food conservation. For more information, visit <http://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/resources/measurement.htm>.

While the goal of these types of initiatives is to reduce food waste, some food waste is inevitable. Used cooking oil is an example of such waste. In cases where food waste cannot be avoided, recycling this waste or repurposing it for industrial uses—such as rendering and energy recovery—is a great way to demonstrate social responsibility. The collection and recycling of cooking oil into biodiesel is a standard process, and one that can contribute significantly to sustainability initiatives.

After switching to an automated oil management system that included recycling used cooking oil, Wild Wing Café, a South Carolina-based chain, reduced annual oil use by almost 14,000 pounds and saved the company \$150,000 across 13 company owned stores. Utilizing practical tracking methods and readily available technologies can create kitchens that are more efficient and add savings to the bottom line. For more information, research organizations such as the Food Waste Alliance. They have developed a Best Practices & Emerging Solutions Toolkit, located on their website, to help foodservice professionals design a food conservation program.

Energy Efficiency

As energy costs continue to rise and the restaurant industry faces tighter profit margins, operations that switch to energy-efficient solutions and practices can reap a multitude of benefits. Options that save energy include EPA Energy Star-rated appliances, programmable HVAC thermostats and monitoring technology that allows operators to monitor and control temperatures from any Web-enabled computer or smartphone, as well as simply changing light bulbs from incandescent to LEDs. Even simple schedules for when equipment should be turned on based on usage can help save significant utility costs and manage peak demands.

Lighting consumes a lot of energy in restaurants, typically accounting for 20 to 30 percent of electric bills. Despite the potential savings, many restaurants haven't made the switch to energy-efficient lighting. A January 2014 phone survey of 1,000 restaurant operators found that more than a third still use incandescent bulbs.

Meanwhile, businesses and families across the nation are making the move to LEDs. According to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), nearly 50 million LEDs were installed in the United States in 2012, saving about \$675 million in annual energy costs. The DOE predicts that switching entirely over to LED lights over the next 20 years could save the country \$250 billion in energy costs, reduce electricity consumption for lighting by nearly 50 percent and avoid 1,800 million metric tons of carbon emissions.

Restaurants can start by incorporating energy-efficient lighting in uncommon areas, such as in exit signs and storerooms. From there, a switch to LEDs in kitchens, dining areas and outdoor signage can come at a more natural pace—and result in a slashed energy bill.

Reducing food and fryer oil waste and utilizing energy-efficient solutions is a realistic opportunity and competitive propellant for every restaurant. The key factor is figuring out the right approach in a focused and cost-effective manner.

Realistic Next Steps

In 2013, the media company Triple Pundit asked people to identify the hurdles a company encounters when trying to implement sustainability practices. The top two responses were “a lack of information on how to implement” and “initiatives interfere with other business processes.” At the same time, restaurants must balance sustainability efforts with providing food and service that stays true to individual values and markets.

The good news is this: By developing simple, focused sustainability plans, restaurants can reduce their environmental footprint while improving the bottom line.

To develop a sustainability plan that fits your restaurant, start with these three steps:

1 Reach out to partners.

Restaurants don't have to develop sustainability plans alone. Distributors and other third parties may already be working with other customers to help determine how they can be more conservation-focused. With their expertise and your operational knowledge, together you can develop an approach that best fits your restaurant.

2 Think simply and use common sense.

In a recent RFMA blog post, Jeff Dover noted that common sense plays a huge role in energy management. He mentioned one very simple way to save on appliance energy costs: stickers. Place stickers on individual cooking equipment that calls out their start time. That way, grills, fryers, ovens, exhaust fans and POS systems won't be turned on hours before they're needed.

Another simple way to manage energy costs is analyzing utility bills. Figure out how much each facility is paying for electricity, natural gas and water, and track costs in a month-over-month grid. Look for trends or anomalies.

3 Educate employees.

While the benefits of sustainability may be apparent to you and your management team, sometimes information can get lost down the chain of command. Stress the importance of sustainability with all employees. Better yet, designate one as a sustainability chair.

Transform staff into sustainability champions by developing an incentive system that rewards them for sound ideas to save energy, reduce material use and improve products. You can also connect with customers and employees to

promote the brand's efforts on social media.

Sustainability can propel the restaurant industry into the future, but now is the time to implement it in your own restaurants. By maintaining management best practices and adopting readily available technologies—such as automated oil management, HVAC system monitoring, and LED lighting—restaurants can convert sustainability into a competitive advantage.

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