



THE BIG SQUEEZE

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Is a trash compactor right for your restaurant?

When you're committed to helping the environment but also want to save money, it can sometimes feel like you're robbing Peter to pay Paul. The current landfill situation is a perfect example. Before landfills, most garbage was just dumped onto the ground, with devastating environmental results. The waste would drain into the ground and then into the water used by local communities.

Back then, there were a lot of garbage dumps, too. Before the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, the U.S. had 7,683 garbage dumps. (A landfill is differentiated from a dump because a landfill must first cover the ground with plastic or clay, and divert runoff to a water treatment facility.) We now only have 1,908 landfills—and they are larger. However, with this new system, which is undoubtedly better for the land, water and people living nearby, diesel trash trucks must drive longer than they ever have to dump the trash. One ton of trash traveling 500 miles can create 115 pounds of carbon dioxide. We've helped the land, but we're hurting the air.

Doing Your Part

So what can you do to help the situation? Compacting your restaurant's trash is one option. Of course, you may have noticed that some money-saving techniques may have higher hidden or long-term costs. This is often the case with trash compactors. You really need to research compactors and audit your own facility to know what kind of trash system you want to use for your facility.

Why compact your trash? There are a few reasons, but I'm going to concentrate on my two driving passions: helping the environment and saving money. Trash compactors use either electric hydraulic or mechanical energy to compress the trash down as much as possible—sometimes up to 70 percent.

Benefitting the Environment

Trash compacting helps the environment in two ways. First, it cuts down on the space used at landfills. Once trash gets into the landfill, there's really nothing that can be done about it. This is why reducing, reusing and recycling are so important: Landfills, in essence, mummify trash, keeping it in one place forever, as opposed to composting it. By reducing the space needed for things that can't be recycled, we can cut down on the amount of space taken up in landfills.

And more crucially, compacted trash means dramatically fewer trash-hauling trips to the landfill. By cutting down on trips, we're reducing both carbon monoxide emissions by the trucks, and the amount of diesel gasoline used. This, in concert with a vigorous recycling program, can ensure that only those materials that cannot be reused or recycled end up in the landfill, taking up as little space as possible.

Achieving Cost Savings

But what about the financial component? Can compacting your trash lead to savings? For larger operations—like hotels, big-box stores and extremely busy restaurants—it definitely makes financial sense to get an electric hydraulic compactor. These devices do require a hefty upfront fee, but for facilities that have to deal with huge amounts of trash, a larger compactor is the way to go.

For larger operations with a takeout or drivethrough component, solar-powered trash cans are another area to consider. If you live in a city with a downtown area, you may be familiar with them. Powered by the sun, these small-scale trash compactors can hold five times as much trash as regular cans and prevent overflow by signaling when they are full. In addition to preventing accidental overflow and decreasing the number of times the cans need to be changed, solar-powered trash cans also signal to your customers that you care about the environment. According to a 2011 National Restaurant Association poll, 69 percent of consumers would rather dine at an environmentally friendly restaurant.

But for smaller restaurants—those in the \$1 million to \$5 million a year range—it might make more sense to go for a manual compactor. There are a few types of manual compactors, but first I want to go over why an electric hydraulic compactor might be too much for a smaller quick-service restaurant. Again, it's a "robbing Peter to pay Paul" situation, on two fronts. First, there's the issue of electricity. If you're in a state that charges more during times of high demand, like California, then running your compactor while also running an air conditioner and walk-in cooler will spike your energy use—and your energy bills.

But the main issue is that most trash haulers have two different charging models. Non-compacted trash is called loose trash, and it's measured by the yard. Compacted trash, however, is measured by weight. This is because trash haulers are charged by the pound for any trash that goes into a landfill. So they make more money by charging you for loose trash if it's not compacted. Once they see you have compacted trash, they start charging you by the pound—up to three times as much as before. So any savings you get by reducing your trash size are then lost by both the initial investment and the higher compacted trash charges.

That's not all. As most compactors are made of steel, and they squeeze any liquid out of the trash, the mix of steel, electricity and liquid can lead to rust issues and electrical outages. For a big-box store or a chain restaurant with the money of a national corporation backing them, this may not be a huge problem, but for smaller restaurants, an electric hydraulic compactor might be more trouble than it's worth.

For these smaller restaurants, a manual compactor might be the way to go. There are a few styles and brands on the market right now, and some are even built for home use. There are tamper-built units, specially designed for restaurants and easily operated by employees. Some units are mechanical; they are designed to simulate the old-fashioned orange juice press, where you use the mechanical advantage to squeeze out the juice. These manual units squash down restaurant-size bags of trash and squeeze out all of the air. This solves the electric and safety factors of the eclectic hydraulic compactor, and compresses the trash just enough to be charged by the vendor as "loose trash," but still save space, both in the trash haulers trucks, and in and around your restaurant.

"In some markets, you can't choose what trash hauler you use; it's up to the city," said Mark Wagner of Pak-ADrum. "So the only way to save money is to divert your waste stream, either by recycling or by lowering the yardage of your trash without getting it so compact the hauler charges you for compacted trash."

Manual compactors are made of stainless steel, and like most mechanical tools, they can last indefinitely, with a few small part replacements. They are designed that way on purpose: The best way to avoid waste is to not create it in the first place.

This is the kind of thinking that's needed to solve our waste problems in an economical way. As Kate Krebs of the National Recycling Coalition says, "Waste is really just a design flaw." Allen Herskowitz of the National Resources Defense Council echoes her sentiments: "Waste is an indication of inefficiency: The more efficient you are, the less waste you produce. The less efficient you are, the more waste you produce."

Creative problem solving, like Wagner's, is also practiced by green pioneers like Chipotle, which found they could prevent 6 tons of plastic from going into the waste stream every year by making their straws just a millimeter smaller. As Caitlin Leibert of Chipotle says: "Don't settle for what is out there. Research, ask questions and dig in. It's really just about asking the right questions."

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