



Green Waste Management Why Go Green

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There are many reasons restaurants go green. Besides a genuine concern for the environment, a restaurant can actually increase its profits by going green. Savvy foodies flock to restaurants that specialize in food made from local, organic ingredients, and those restaurants that advertise green practices in their marketing strategy are winning a greater market share.

The market for green restaurants grows every year. In 2008, the National Restaurant Association found that 62 percent of consumers polled would rather dine at an environmentally friendly restaurant, given the choice. By 2011, that number had grown to 69 percent.

Getting Strategic

Unfortunately, going green can be expensive if a strategic approach is not taken. While going green can be as simple as buying a juicy and delicious farmer's market tomato, that's not enough for a restaurateur to wear the green title. Restaurant managers know there is so much more to running a successful restaurant than cooking great food. What happens in and behind the kitchen is just as crucial. Buying, growing, serving and recycling the food and solid waste presents just as powerful of an opportunity as the menu does.

While being green may not be a high priority, it is still an opportunity for a restaurant to increase its business base and help improve the environment. By making a few simple strategic changes (none of them being radical), you can make a difference in the future of this great country.

Liquid and Solid Waste Management

Since the United States is an early adopter of single-stream recycling (which includes bottles, cans, aluminum, plastic, cardboard and paper) along with composting, it will take time for pricing for these services to equalize. As history continually dictates, it will likely decrease as more competitors get into the market. For now, there are certain areas of the country where it makes sense to invest in recycling services—especially where the pricing for trash pick-up and single-stream/composting is lower than at a landfill. At a landfill, you pay a premium charge.

Recycling regulations have been changing gradually; larger municipalities are beginning to enforce source separation of food and certain commodities. While not widespread, more communities are setting up standards to keep the bulk out of the landfills. Those businesses that recycle commodities and food have shown an increase of business because they advertise and promote these best practices. In the consumer's eyes, they care about the public and want to make a difference.

So, if your goal is to increase business, serve cleaner and healthier food, and become more environmentally friendly, why not get a head start on it? Here are four important areas where you can go green with your management of liquid and solid waste:

Recycling

The simplest way to initiate a green waste management revolution in your restaurant is to recycle bottles, cans, aluminum, paper, glass and plastic. This may sound basic, but in the chaotic rush of a dinner hour, certain recyclables can get thrown in with the landfill trash.

Creating this kind of culture in your kitchen is no small feat. Your business must first conduct a waste audit and figure out your biggest problem areas. If, for example, your restaurant uses lots of aluminum cans, you can start the recycling process by making sure all cans are recycled. Once this becomes second nature, move on to your next biggest problem area. If it is glass, cutlery or polypropylene, prepare a work-flow to determine current process and procedures, and work to change the confusion. Focus on recycling during a time when restaurant staff is not

inundated. If space is limited, focus on the space and what is possible.

Many food suppliers and farms will deliver food in recyclable packaging. Reward them with repeat business. Between recyclable packaging and separating food scraps for composting, you can greatly reduce the waste your restaurant sends to the landfill. And the less tonnage going to the landfill, the less you pay for trash services.

Compost

Composting is the flip side to being a farm-to-table restaurant. By composting the food waste, you contribute to the ecosystem that created your delicious local organic menu. Compost is food waste that is allowed to decompose until it becomes a fertilized soil ideal for growing more food. There are a few ways to create compost on your own. One involves worms (though this may not be the best idea if you're composting near your restaurant), another involves darkness and heat, and a third simply uses time to break down the food. Unless you are experienced at making compost, it's probably a good idea to either purchase an in-vessel unit or use a service to take away your food scraps. This does cost money, but if your restaurant already creates a large amount of compostable material, the cost is offset by the fact that you are creating less trash, which greatly reduces the money you pay to have your trash bins taken out.

In some states, such as Massachusetts, composting is not a matter of choice; it's the law. Due to the state's limited landfill space, any restaurant that creates a ton of organic waste per week during any one-week period of the year is no longer allowed to send any compostable items to the landfill. Similar laws are on the books for New York and California. So even if composting is not profitable for your restaurant right now (e.g., for fast food or fast-casual restaurants), it may be a good idea to educate yourself on the process, in case it's required in the future.

Besides finding the right service to take care of your food scraps, all you need to do to get started is get some green bins and train your staff to separate food scraps from trash when cleaning up. This is no easy task, but if you can create that culture in your restaurant now, you will be ahead of the game if your state mandates composting. If you have to save up your compostable items to justify the cost of one pick-up, you may be able to store the scraps in a dedicated container in your freezer to avoid unwanted smells.

Bio-Augmentation

Grease traps are an unpleasant fact of life for restaurants. They are used in plumbing systems to keep grease from getting into pipes and building up, which can completely block the pipes. If you have ever experienced a plumbing system backed up by grease, then you know the smell alone can ruin a diner's experience, stop the smooth flow of a restaurant's kitchen or, worst case, lead to restaurant closure.

Until recently, the solution to this problem has been to pay someone to pump the grease traps and snake the pipes. However, for certain kinds of restaurants, bio-augmentation is a new way to mitigate the cost and lessen the chance of a backup. The idea behind bio-augmentation is to use certain bio-degradable bacteria inside the pipes and trap to break down the grease and solids. Bioaugmentation is still a new field, and not allowed in all jurisdictions, so be sure to consult a company that is experienced in this line of work. Though bio-augmentation doesn't solve the problem completely, it does work as an environmentally friendly way to ensure fewer backups.

E-Waste

E-waste is any old or broken equipment you have—from your old computer system to stoves, microwaves and refrigerators. Every year brings new breakthroughs in green technologies, so replacing your old equipment with more energy-efficient equipment is good for the environment and your wallet in the long run. But what to do about the old equipment?

Most old electronic equipment is recyclable. But you can't just shove an old oven into your blue recycling bin. Most cities have designated areas for dropping off e-waste. But why stop there? You can take a proactive position and partner with your local e-waste recycling center to create an "E-Waste Drop-off Day" in your restaurant's parking lot. Give any recyclers a discount, and you'll both help the environment and get the word out about your restaurant's commitment to going green. It takes commitment, but once you do this, be sure to send a press release out to your customers; they will return because you care.

Waste Not, Want Not

Single-stream recycling, composting, bio-augmentation and e-waste recycling are the first of many ways to go green

with your restaurant's waste diversion program; however, it is an incremental process. Take easily attainable steps to institute change, and recognize that it takes time for best practices to be implemented. By going green, you'll reap many unexpected benefits such as:

- Setting a positive example boosts employee moral and loyalty.
- By differentiating your business as a green entity, you gain a competitive advantage.
- You can lower operating costs while improving efficiency.
- You allow the community to see you as a green initiative leader.

And while it is yet another program on your list of many things to do, it is necessary to make this commitment for your customers, your employees and your communities. Local laws and regulations all over the country are pointing toward a time when going green may not be a choice. Make "waste not, want not" part of your waste management strategy.

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