

Five Steps to Improve Restaurant Sustainability

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How to be a model of sustainability to retain a talented team

Demand for labor has certainly heated up in the past year as restaurants compete with each other and with other industries to attract new talent. The labor shortage is predicted to be an ongoing challenge, unless you know what potential new hires are looking for in an employer. According to a recent survey of millennials, who by 2020 are projected to make up 50 percent of the global workforce, today's employees want to be part of something bigger and want to team up with organizations with a purpose. They are looking for a cause, whether it is reflected in the company's mission statement, the sourcing of ingredients or other sustainability initiatives. The bottom line is millennials are paying attention.

Having effective waste management procedures is critically important not only for a restaurant's bottom line but also for engaging employees who want to see that their employer is demonstrating corporate social responsibility.

A Dirty Job Someone Must Do

The job of waste management isn't glamorous. No one is clamoring to handle and dispose of food waste, clean up spills or trash overflow, or scrape dishes of uneaten food. Some of these jobs, such as managing hot cooking oil disposal, can also be dangerous. Mishandling oil can lead to burns, slips and falls. Because these jobs are considered unpleasant, they are often not performed properly, in a timely fashion or even at all.

Some restaurants face difficulties in dedicating resources and employee time to effectively manage food waste or recycling programs; however, when such jobs are ignored, excess waste and poorly enforced standard operating procedures (SOPs) result in an unsightly restaurant appearance, unwanted pests and other health concerns. The presence of insects or rodents in or near garbage areas or smelly rendering tanks poses a risk for cross contaminating food-preparation areas, which can result in the health department issuing a critical code violation during inspection. New York City has a strict letter-grading policy assessing cleanliness, food safety and handling, and the city requires restaurants to post inspection results on their windows. Anything less than the coveted "A" grade can negatively affect branding, reputation and hurt business.

Improper waste management procedures also result in higher monetary and environmental costs. From an environmental standpoint, trash takes up more space in landfills, and restaurants have to pay additional trash-hauling fees when they are throwing away extra packaging, unused or spoiled food, or other items that could be recycled. Not following proper waste management procedures can also lead to the potential for workers' compensation claims resulting from slippery floors due to food debris or mismanaged cooking oil or food waste.

Steps for Sustainability

Designing the right waste management program can help restaurants engage employees while improving sustainability efforts. Cutting waste and building efficiency can reduce costs, and these five steps can contribute to this effort:

1 Reduce your environmental footprint. It goes without saying that the more you can reduce, reuse and recycle to divert waste from landfills, the better. Have properly labeled trash and recycling receptacles available. Then reduce paper and cardboard waste by having it picked up for recycling. It's also important to source food responsibly to avoid waste and use equipment that maintains proper temperature to avoid spoiled food.

2 Invest in the right equipment. Several types of equipment can help restaurants cut down on energy usage and reduce food and other waste. Replace older equipment with Energy Star-qualified models. Scrapping systems help with pre-rinsing and handling of food waste. They typically recirculate water at a high volume to speed up the process and decrease labor. Pulpers turn food scraps into compost, without sending the wastewater into the sewer,

as disposals do. Compactors can also cut the footprint of kitchen waste by as much as 70 percent, minimizing the space that would be taken up in landfills. Don't forget an automated oil management system, which helps to eliminate one of the kitchen's dirtiest jobs: manual oil handling. It not only uses less oil and eliminates packaging and used oil waste—as many as 40 of the 35-pound jugs of oil per month, per location, that would typically get thrown in the trash—but it also turns cooking-oil waste into biodiesel.

3 Water. Consider measures to cut water usage or the amount of energy that it takes to heat the water. Some restaurants use lowflow aerators in sinks or low-flow spray nozzles in dish rooms. Others use an Energy Star-qualified dishwashing system that can save up to 3 gallons of water per rack or capture hot-water vapor and condense it to heat the water used for rinsing.

4 Find the right partners. Some restaurants bring their compost to local farms. Others partner with companies that can handle their recycling. Perhaps there is a nonprofit willing to accept donated food. Form sustainable partnerships with others in the community.

5 Tell your story. Talk about your efforts through social media or on your company website. Use it as a tool for education and to motivate your customers to embrace sustainability initiatives. All of these practices help to reduce not only labor inefficiencies but also waste creation.

Get Everyone on Board

Following SOPs improves back-of-house performance, so it's important to have everyone on board and familiar with protocols, especially as new employees are hired. Don't forget that proper training is necessary to clearly communicate SOPs. Repetition of policies and procedures is key. It also helps to conduct daily protocols for early detection of anything that could prompt maintenance. Similar to the health department, use letter grades to help employees improve and to reduce the potential for health-code violations.

Include employees in sustainability initiatives, and share goals and results so that they understand they are part of something bigger. Creating a team environment can improve employee morale and increase participation. If there is someone with a passion for a certain sustainability effort, give him or her the responsibility of spearheading it. One way to encourage this spirit is to hold contests as a friendly competition and to boost results at the same time. When offering rewards and other incentives, a little appreciation serves as the proper encouragement to get the work done.

No matter how you do it, implementing a waste management program that engages the workforce can help restaurants boost their bottom line, be a model of sustainability, and attract and retain a talented team.

Jeffrey Kiesel is the Chief Executive Officer of Restaurant Technologies Inc. (RTI). With a decade of experience as CEO and more than 20 years of senior leadership experience, Kiesel is both the head and heart of RTI. As a savvy business leader, he helped the company expand into new regional service locations and evolve the Total Oil Management™ portal to meet the ever-changing needs of the company's foodservice customers. Kiesel earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Williams College, Williamstown, Mass., and an MBA from the Krannert School of Management, Purdue University.