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A Shared Vision

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Executing corporate sustainability initiatives at the restaurant level

Environmental sustainability is about more than just being good for the planet and the bottom line; it is a strategy for meeting the demands of consumers who increasingly care about where food comes from, how it is grown and prepared, and what impact it has on the world.

Many restaurant brands have pledged their commitment to sustainability and publicly promote their efforts to source local ingredients, engage in fair trade, make better use of natural resources, and use more recyclable and compostable materials in packaging. Standard operating procedures that align with these corporate initiatives are in place to guide procurement, store set-up, food preparation and operations at the restaurant level.

However, the foodservice industry is evolving, and we are seeing a shift toward a more decentralized business model as brands increasingly sell corporate-owned restaurants to franchisees. This can make it challenging to maintain a cohesive sustainability model and for brands to ensure that the sustainability initiatives outlined on corporate websites are carried out locally.

This is most evident with waste management. While a corporate brand may work with a handful of national food or packaging suppliers and negotiate pricing with them on behalf of franchisees, there are thousands of local and regional waste management and recycling providers—each with its own systems and methods of reporting— supporting franchisees around the country. It is extremely difficult to aggregate recycling and diversion information from such a disparate group and measure progress against corporate sustainability goals. Recycling and waste management laws that vary by state and local market add another layer of complexity. Yet, waste management, especially organics recycling and diversion, is vitally important to the foodservice industry and our planet.

Achieving Waste Management Goals

Restaurant facility management professionals play a key role in ensuring restaurants are meeting corporate and store-level sustainability goals pertaining to food waste. Some factors for restaurant facility managers to consider when it comes to waste management include:

Legislation. Legislation mandating disposal and waste management varies by state and market, and new laws continue to be introduced. In Massachusetts, for instance, businesses and institutions that dispose of 1 ton or more of organic waste per week must divert that food waste from the landfill through composting, conversion, recycling or reuse. The City of Austin, Texas, through its Universal Recycling Ordinance, is requiring all food enterprises to ensure their employees have access to organics diversion services by October 1, 2018.

It can be challenging to keep up with current legislation or to get ahead of proposed laws that would impact organics recycling, but doing so is crucial. As awareness of the challenge of food waste increases—in September, 2015, the USDA and EPA announced a national goal to reduce food waste by 50 percent by 2030—additional legislation likely will drive more organics recycling programs. Tracking enacted and planned recycling and disposal laws at the local, state and federal level will help restaurants ensure compliance, avoid fines and protect the reputation of their brands.

Waste audits. Conducting a comprehensive audit of the waste stream can help restaurants identify potential legislative violations, as well as cost savings opportunities. On average, 30 to 40 percent of total volume in restaurant waste streams is organic food waste; that volume makes up 50 to 60 percent of the waste stream's total weight. Other materials found in restaurant waste streams include paper, corrugated board, plastics, metal, cooking oil and grease. By diverting food waste from landfills through recycling, composting and waste-to-energy programs, restaurants are able to significantly reduce the amount of waste sent to landfills (a win for the environment) and lower their disposal costs since haulers charge by weight. Non-food organic waste such as paper packaging and corrugated board in restaurant waste streams could even prove to be a revenue generator for brands if they opt to bundle and sell these recyclables to international markets. Finally, waste audits can help restaurants improve forecasting and operations by providing insight into where they may be over-ordering prepared food and ingredients or wasting food during the prep and cooking processes.

Employee training. Brands may espouse sustainability goals, but employees are the ones executing plans at the restaurant level. Facility managers should ensure all employees and operators understand corporate sustainability goals—not just what they are, but why they matter to the brand—and receive the necessary training and documentation about policies and procedures to support waste management, organics recycling and diversion initiatives. Receptacles placed either at the back or front of house or at the counter should facilitate compliance while signage helps reinforce training and visually outlines processes. Restaurants

also should anticipate scenarios where employees' efforts to implement corporate sustainability initiatives may be impeded (e.g., delays in collecting receptacles full of organic materials due to weather or hauler service issues causing food waste to pile up and present a health hazard in restaurants) and prepare them to respond with alternative solutions and access to support.

Customer communications.

Restaurants aim to serve good food and provide a positive experience to customers, but sustainability is not incongruous with this objective. Consumers do not want the materials in their meals—whether it is the food itself or the packaging that contains it—to harm the planet. They want to feel good about the brands they support and trust that the businesses they frequent are responsible stewards of the environment. Facility managers should involve consumers in sustainability and diversion efforts at the restaurant level by communicating the brand's sustainability goals and achievements through signage and by offering mixed recycling bins and packaging that is clearly labeled to facilitate recycling.

Playing a Key Role

As brands continue to rebrand restaurants and the number of franchises relative to corporate restaurants increases, it becomes more challenging to communicate corporate sustainability goals, ensure they are properly executed at the restaurant level and aggregate results of efforts from across the brand. Facility management professionals are the lynchpin between the corporate brand and franchise restaurants, ensuring processes at the local level align with and support corporate initiatives.

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