

Recycling Realities

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LEARNING TO THRIVE AMID CHANGE

Pop quiz: Is a to-go coffee cup recyclable? What about a take-out container or the plastic utensils that come with it? How about a glass mason jar?

The answer: It depends.

The line between trash and recycling used to be fairly straightforward. And with the advent of single-stream recycling in the early 2000s, it seemed almost any container, envelope or carton had a home in the recycle bin and a shot at a second life. Recycling markets tolerated as much as 10 percent contamination, and material recovery facilities were well-equipped to pick out the rogue polystyrene cup, food-soaked can or glass jar.

Today, however, market conditions have created uncertainty and are forcing changes at all levels. With less than 0.5 percent contamination accepted in major Chinese markets and the value of each load minimized or even eliminated, piles of materials that, little more than a year ago, were considered recyclable are now trash—and headed to the landfill on your dime. Municipalities and service providers across the country are reacting, ramping up enforcement of contamination fines at restaurants, adding new organics requirements, raising rates for recycling—and increasing the cost for you to do business.

Embracing Agility

What can you do to control costs, comply with regulations and continue to drive toward your company's diversion and sustainability goals? In this dynamic environment, the most important thing is for your restaurants to be agile and ready to adapt to the evolving conditions in the local markets.

We have an opportunity to get back to basics. But what this means may look different from restaurant to restaurant. Below are steps you can take to support each of your restaurants to create and foster a culture of proper recycling and waste management that enables them to conform with the realities of today's market and prepare for what lies ahead:

1 Build your team: Stackholder, champions and industry expert.

The United States does not have a national recycling policy, and as a result, recycling markets, requirements and regulations vary widely across states, counties and municipalities.

- For example, glass is recyclable in New London County, Conn., but not in Erie County, Penn., or Candler County, Ga.
- Saratoga County, N.Y., accepts plastics 1-7 while Waukesha County, Wisc., only accepts plastics 1 and 2.
- For restaurants in California or Austin, Texas, organics recycling is a must. If they are in San Diego, they must work directly with the city to set up their service.

For restaurants with a regional or national footprint, this regulatory landscape poses a challenge for corporate teams to define and deploy a standard program. But it also presents an opportunity to build teams of stakeholders, champions and industry experts at the location level. Corporate teams can create the framework by setting goals and defining metrics. To implement a compliant program, they can then help bring together teams from operations, facilities, local waste service providers and waste program companies, or they can work with companies that specialize in this type of support.

2 Understand markets: What goes where?

The first thing each location team needs to understand is their market: What regulations are in place? Is recycling required? If so, what materials can be recycled? Is organics diversion required? What type of materials are acceptable?

If your restaurant employees don't understand what materials to recycle at their location, they may be unknowingly contaminating loads. In some areas, such as New York City, recycling requirements are different for residential and business customers. Households separate metal, glass and plastic from paper and cardboard, but at work people can mix these streams in a single bin. This can cause confusion and lead to contamination and missed diversion.

Where can restaurants find this information? Since there is no universal source of truth across the country, for restaurants with decentralized operations, the first and best place to start is with a phone call to the waste services provider to ask the following:

- What recycling service is required?
- What can we recycle?
- Can you provide signs?
- Are we recycling correctly?

With boots on the ground, local providers know their markets and will support their customers to recycle correctly. Restaurants working with a national, centralized program can lean on their national provider to support program alignment. Additional resources include local departments of public works, city recycling offices or, in a state like California, the state recycling entity.

Knowing what goes where must be second nature for every employee. It should be part of onboarding and reinforced through clear, prominent signs at each point of disposal. Given the high turnover of restaurant employees, training should happen repeatedly and on a set schedule.

3 Understand your materials: What comes in and what goes out.

The team at each location should conduct a material assessment to understand the materials generated and which containers are needed to dispose of each stream. Containers should be placed to make it easy for employees to correctly dispose material. Demonstrations can help reinforce procedures.

If your restaurant has lofty diversion goals and you find that many of the products you use come in non-recyclable packaging, this may be an opportunity to look at your material sourcing.

- If glass is not recyclable in certain markets, can those restaurants order more products in cardboard packaging or metal cans?
- Can you order products in different-sized packaging to reduce waste?
- If you are diverting organics, can you utilize compostable packaging in any of your operations?

Depending on your company's procurement processes, some decisions can be made at the corporate level while others can be made locally.

4 Material handling: Keep recyclables clean.

Keeping materials separated from source to curb prevents contamination. Appropriate, labeled bins should be placed at points of generation to encourage source separation. Generic signs are useful, as are signs that address specific challenges you observe. For example, if you repeatedly see unwashed soup cans in the recycling container, consider adding a sign near the recycling bin to remind employees to rinse cans.

A growing source of recycling contamination is plastic bags. Plastic shopping bags are recyclable at certain retail stores but are not recyclable in single-stream recycling programs. Bags get tangled in the machinery and can cause total work stoppages. This also means that recyclable materials must not be bagged when tossed into your dumpster. Your team can use plastic bags to line recycling bins or transport recycling to the container for pickup, but these bags must be removed and thrown in the trash.

5 Create a culture of responsible waste management.

Each restaurant team needs support to implement, monitor, track and reinforce a waste-management program that follows local rules and maximizes diversion opportunities. The initial setup of the program will take time but will pay off in avoidance of fines and greater recycling volumes. The work won't stop there, though. Success will continue if stakeholders commit to inspecting containers, providing feedback and continuing to keep waste-handling basics at the forefront of operations.

Making proper waste management a priority will not happen without corporate leadership. Corporate leaders should track and analyze spend and diversion at each restaurant and then recognize top performers and offer additional guidance to others.

If the last year and a half is any indication, what the future of recycling looks like is anything but certain. What we can be sure of, however, is that recycling in some form is here to stay. In this unsettled environment, the best investment you can make is in learning to live— and thrive—amid change.

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