

It's Not Easy Being Green

S. Ray Hatch

Reducing Food Waste

New regulations are opportunities for industry-wide change

Restaurant regulations are always changing. With more cities adopting zero-waste initiatives, restaurants must adopt sweeping changes. For example, Austin, Texas, recently became the latest city to ban people from throwing away food waste, following in the footsteps of cities like San Francisco and Seattle. Restaurant facility managers need to know what to expect when citywide zero-waste programs involve reducing or eliminating food waste.

Be Proactive

The biggest issue restaurants face when major regulation changes occur is the interruption of established workflows. If there's a deadline, making these changes becomes even more frantic, which allows mistakes to happen. If you know regulations are coming, begin making small changes now. Tweak your workflows and vendors and employee education programs slowly and as you go. Otherwise, you're left having to make drastic changes later to avoid penalties, fines and work stoppage. Being proactive also gives you time to explore solutions that you hadn't considered before.

No-Waste Solutions

A citywide zero-waste initiative forces restaurants to reduce or eliminate food waste. Diverting food waste from landfills hasn't been a major concern, but with statistics showing that food waste accounts for nearly 20 percent of landfill mass, it's become the focus of many new regulations.

Businesses must find new ways of handling food waste to stay compliant. For instance, in San Francisco and Seattle, by law, all food waste is composted. This includes food from households. The city has placed compostable waste bins throughout the city and provides residents with composting bags.

Composting diverts food waste from landfills and is profitable. It is becoming more mainstream nationwide, and finding a vendor to collect food waste is easier today. According to a statement by Sam Angoori, Interim Director of Austin Resource Recovery, “The city is committed to helping companies, large and small, find cost-effective solutions and establish diversion programs to ensure food and other organics are put to best use while meeting ordinance requirements.”

Food donation programs are also becoming more popular. Good Samaritan laws, such as the Federal Bill Emerson Food Donation Act, protect restaurants from food donation liabilities. Millions of Americans are food insecure, and these donation programs can help them. Restaurant brands can partner with organizations such as Feeding America.

Emerging technologies, such as micro-food digestors, which are placed on-site at a restaurant, can eliminate food waste altogether. Currently, food digestors handle organic waste at food manufacturing facilities and other largescale growing operations, but they are being scaled down for use in a wider variety of applications.

The Business Case

Ultimately, food waste costs restaurants money. A recent Thomson Reuters Foundation study showed that every \$1 spent on food-waste reduction saves a business \$14. The new regulations shouldn't be seen as a burden but as an opportunity to do the right thing and save money at the same time.

The first step in properly handling food waste is to not create as much of it. Then, evaluate your vendors and recycling opportunities to ensure that when regulations are passed, you are already on the right track to being compliant. Adopting better business practices now will lead to higher profit margins in the future—not to mention the fact that consumers are very aware of which companies embrace sustainable practices. Reducing and recycling food waste before it is mandatory can set your brand apart from the competition.

Regulations are just a part of doing business these days, and as a facility manager, staying ahead of the curve will ultimately save your restaurants time and money. Knowing what is coming, taking the time to evaluate the changes and acting now will prevent potentially disastrous pitfalls in the future.

In the end, you're also doing the right thing. Be proud of sustainable practices. With consumer awareness levels at all-time highs due to social media, attracting customers— even the picky ones—

is the key to growth.

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