



Facilitator — February/March 2013



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SUSTAINABILITY: Now and Forever

Richard Young

“Sustainability” has evolved into a concept that seems to mean something different to everyone. At its core, it refers to people who are serious about the environment, but it is also used as a feel-good lever for self-promotion and as a negative term to protect business-as-usual practices.

Most people define sustainability in terms of leaving a non-depleted environment for future generations, but others, such as the visionary architect and designer William McDonough, consider that definition to be the baseline. During his keynote address at the U.S. Green Building Council’s Greenbuild Conference, McDonough said “...sustainable, is that the best we can do?” His main point was “being less bad is not [the same as] being good.”

McDonough and other thought leaders envision a future in which our buildings don’t just operate at net-zero and our materials aren’t merely recycled. They see a day when we actually enrich the environment around us. From a different angle, many climate scientists now look at sustainability as past tense—they are watching the climate change in real time and have, unfortunately, moved on to “adaptation.”

A Practical Approach

This big-picture discussion of sustainability is fascinating, but it will probably be a while before any chain restaurants can meet the Living Building Challenge. In the meantime, what is our definition of sustainability, and how do we approach it in a real and practical way?

Don Fisher, from the Food Service Technology Center, once said, “Sustainability is staying in business when gas hits \$5 a gallon!” That is about as direct as it gets. Fisher’s definition doesn’t ask you to understand climate models, ocean acidification or food miles. It asks what you are going to do to cut operating costs on three big-ticket items: electricity, natural gas and water. And the answer, from a facility maintenance standpoint, is to turn “best practice” into “standard practice.” When energy and water efficiency becomes standard practice, you will have achieved sustained cost savings and, coincidentally, you will be contributing to environmental sustainability. Do the best you can and don’t fret over the big-picture issues; the work to be done is right in front of us on a daily basis.

True Energy Efficiency

The facility managers I’ve met through RFMA are as practical, straightforward and dedicated as any group of professionals I’ve talked to. If there is any group of people who can move efficiency from best practice to standard practice in the restaurant world, it is the facility managers. Admittedly, the task of keeping a group of restaurants open and running effectively is a daunting challenge, and facility managers have some great stories of what works and what doesn’t. Unfortunately, some of those stories are about the ways energy efficiency does not work.

Yes, the food service industry is still new to energy efficiency, and we are still learning what is practical and what is not. Some technologies are not robust enough, some are not effective and some are outright phony (buyer beware!), but there are many proven ways to save energy and water. We have no excuse not to try them. The only barriers are habit, time, money, knowledge and cooperation from the field—but this is doable. If we were to combine all the knowledge and practices of all the facility managers into one uber facility manager, then the energy-efficiency geeks could retire and go fishing. Everybody has a little piece of the pie. Our big-picture goal is to create an army of energy-wise uber facility managers. When that goal is accomplished, energy costs will be reduced, restaurants stay in business and we achieve sustainability.

At an RFMA national conference, I met a really smart director of operations who told me a story I'll never forget. He was implementing many of the efficient practices I've mentioned. Then we starting talking about insulating hot water lines everywhere they were accessible—not just in that first few feet off the tank. He said had tried it, but he had to remove the insulation above the ceiling. "Why?" I asked. "That is such an easy energy saver." He told me that in their cold climate stores, once the hot water pipes were insulated, the cold water lines running next to them above the ceiling started to freeze and break.

That is a legitimate problem and something we had not heard before. But, it begs the question: Do we live in a society that is so rich that we can throw away energy to radiantly heat the space above the ceiling tiles? Is that the sustainable approach to facility management?

We discussed this challenge and arrived at a couple of suggestions: insulating the cold water lines as well? What about the building insulation? Was there adequate deck insulation? Ultimately we agreed that retreat—going back to the un-insulated hot water lines—was not the ideal approach. Facility management folks are very clever and resourceful. I'm sure that the readers of this article have already worked out a half-dozen practical solutions in their heads.

Breaking the Habit

So, what's next? Here are three approaches that might help break our old habits and turn energy and water efficiency from best practice to standard practice.

Think outside the box. Where are you throwing away energy? What creative solutions can you come up with to plug your energy leaks? Bring that same creativity that you put into your weekend hobbies into your facilities. Challenge your field teams to come up with ideas, and reward them with public praise.

Be persistent. Sustainability is not a fad. The concept of "sustainable" does not have a finish line. It is open-ended and requires persistence and a change of habit. Experts say the way to change habitual behavior is by moving forward a little bit at a time and never giving up.

Turn it into a game. We have a lot more fun when we turn challenges into entertainment. Game research shows that gamers fail 80 percent of the time and yet they still come back for more. Gamers are the hardest working problem solvers the world has ever seen. (More humans have played Farmville than have participated in any joint endeavor in all of human history.) So, how about making efficiency a little more fun? Chris Moyer, former restaurant manager and sustainability consultant for the National Restaurant Association, was hugely successful at lowering the energy and water bills at his restaurants. He would attribute his success to good-business practice but, knowing Moyer for years, I believe he was successful because he turned his work into a game. He tracked his bills and benchmarked his stores, and saving energy became like killing zombies on the PlayStation. He enjoyed what he was doing, and therefore, he was very effective.

What, Me Worry?

Let's wrap this discussion up with the big question: Why should I care? Don't I get paid the same regardless of how sustainable my stores are? Isn't all this efficiency stuff just another hassle? The answer is:

Your business counts on it. Food service is completely reliant on natural resources. Energy consumption is driving changes in the natural environment that are, and will continue to be, a challenge to the food supply. People at the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) are very concerned about climate change since coffee is a sensitive plant and climate change in Ethiopia could wipe out all the heirloom Arabica plants. Imagine a world with no more good coffee! The SCAA is very serious about bringing sustainability to their industry. Saving energy is one of the best things you can do to protect your raw materials.

Energy will become more expensive, which will affect customer traffic and food costs. Can you afford to be wasteful? If efficiency is your standard practice, then you won't have to worry about that when gas hits \$5 a gallon.

Sustainability For the FUTURE

Looking ahead a couple of decades, it's not hard to envision a kitchen of the future that is more comfortable, automated, flexible and efficient. The trend will be to do more in less space and with better control. We've already started that journey with innovations like rapid-cook ovens, combination ovens and demandcontrolled ventilation systems.

In his recent Kitchen of the Future presentation at the 25th Anniversary of the Food Service Technology Center, FSTC researcher David Zabrowski pitched a scenario in which he reduced 21 feet of cookline in a full-service kitchen down to 13 feet, while cutting the cost to operate by \$5,000 a year. All of the appliances exist today; it's the application of these more advanced, high-efficiency appliances that will make this kitchen a reality.

Some of the new, more efficient technologies and design techniques that the Food Service Technology Center is currently studying include the lidded charbroiler, dish-machine heat recovery technology, efficient ice machines and off-peak ice production, induction cooking, high-efficiency water heaters and efficient hot water system design, and solid state (LED) lighting. Because of the size, buying power and customized cooking platforms of the chain restaurant world, it's most likely that chain restaurants will lead the way in implementing the kitchen of the future.

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