



It's Not Easy Being Green

Susan Daywitt

A Winning Proposal The restaurants' guide to zero waste

As more restaurant owners aim for a higher standard in sustainability, they are finding that not only does it make a statement to their customers on their business philosophy; it optimizes the overall performance and functionality of their facility.

The idea of zero waste is no longer a question in the minds of restaurateurs; that vision has now become a reality within the industry. In fact, several restaurants are currently well on their way to achieving the goal of zero waste by implementing major sustainable changes that will not only save money and conserve energy, but eliminate waste altogether.

A sustainable business is mindful of its impact on the environment. Typical ecofriendly practices include choosing biodegradable products, reducing waste, conserving water and participating in recycling and composting.

One of the biggest obstacles with the idea of zero waste is not understanding how to reach this goal. Too often, restaurant owners just don't have enough knowledge or experience to even know where to begin. Education is key in creating a sustainable program that will work efficiently and effectively to ensure a permanent solution for zero waste.

Sustainable Options

Eco-friendly solutions are quite accessible in today's market. In fact, they are essentially everywhere we look. Implementing sustainable business practices has now become a top priority for restaurateurs. Food waste and water make up a large portion of a restaurant's waste stream; the average restaurant uses 300,000 gallons of water per year. So what are restaurants doing to achieve zero waste?

Composting is one of the most efficient and cost-effective ways to initiate zero waste in your establishment. Not only does it significantly reduce the amount of waste your restaurant disposes of, it also teaches your employees to think carefully before throwing away certain food-related items.

Education and visual signage make it easy for patrons and employees to understand how to sort organic waste from other trash and recyclables. Successful composting starts with a well-evaluated program that is both simple and easily maintained by all employees. Key factors for a successful program include signage and visuals, a packaging strategy, education and a simple process. According to GreenBiz blogger Heather Clancy, here are several approaches that will reduce the amount of organics being sent to landfills:

- Source reduction, including portion control, which will cut back on the amount of food waste created (and will require an upfront assessment of your company's habits)
- Donations to food banks, soup kitchens and shelters
- Sending food scraps to farmers
- Collecting and providing fats for rendering or use in various alternative energy generation approaches
- Recycling scraps into nutrients that can be added back into the soil

Restaurants are now utilizing their own compost to fertilize organic vegetables and herbs that are grown on rooftop gardens or patios. Taking advantage of the resources created within your own facility is not only financially feasible; it's beneficial to the environment as well.

Real-world Recycling Programs

Forming in-house recycling programs might seem like an obvious solution to reducing waste and getting one step closer to zero waste but, too often, these programs fall through the cracks due to lack of efficiency and organization. Implementing effective recycling programs offers economic benefits and promotes a positive impact on the environment.

When developing a recycling program that's right for your establishment, first make yourself aware of the local rules and regulations. Check with local waste haulers/recyclers in your area to determine whether they already have a recycling program in place and how your restaurant can participate. By identifying programs in your area, you may be able to utilize single-stream recycling, which collects all recyclable materials in one bin. A program that uses identifying color-coded containers for recyclables such as glass, metals, plastics and papers gives your employees a clear representation of recycling and can be easily maintained on a daily basis. Designate a person and/or team of recycling coordinators to oversee your recycling efforts.

As noted in SLM's Sustainable Solution blog, used cooking oil can be effectively recycled into a number of secondary products, including bio-diesel. Bio-diesel is a clean-burning fuel alternative to petroleum diesel that helps reduce reliance on petroleum products and reduce emissions from the transport sector. Used oil is collected from your on-site tank and delivered to a processing facility. The oil is filtered into large storage tanks, which are heated and treated for subsequent conversion into a range of other products, including biofuel, animal feed products, detergents and soap, paint and industrial lubricants.

In addition to recycling, many restaurants are reusing materials to design their facilities by installing flooring made from recovered wood or countertops made with recycled paper or plastics, using recycled paper for menus, using biodegradable products and utensils, and even purchasing recycled paper straws.

Biodegradable products and packaging are one of the most eco-friendly and alternative restaurant supplies made available. In fact, the use of Styrofoam and polystyrene food packaging is now banned in several U.S. cities. Switching to biodegradable packaging and eliminating single-use containers makes a bold statement to customers and surrounding communities that restaurants are taking practical measures to be more responsible with the natural resources that are available.

Going One Step Further

Achieving zero waste means taking it a step further than just composting and recycling. While they are both equally important, extreme sustainability is essential internally as well as externally to complete this goal. Extreme sustainability means analyzing every aspect of your facility and developing an environmental design that fits into your budget and overall business plan.

Becoming certified by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is a smart way to develop a strategic design that will encompass all of your

needs. LEED provides building owners with a framework for identifying and implementing practical and measurable green building designs, construction, operations and maintenance solutions.

Chipotle's Example

One restaurant in particular is paving the way for a sustainable future by applying eco-friendly solutions within each of their locations. In 2008 Chipotle opened the Gurnee, Ill., location, which is the first restaurant to receive the platinum LEED certification for their environmental efforts. Not only have they designed the majority of this facility using green materials, they are working toward zero waste by developing in-store recycling programs, diverting trash, reducing water and energy, and implementing a Green Housekeeping Policy with a commitment to pursue environmental, health and safety concerns in each of their restaurants.

Chipotle has reduced their water consumption by installing plants that require less fertilizer and pesticides and using highly efficient indoor fixtures such as prerinse sprayers, faucets, toilets, urinals, ice machines and water heaters. They also installed a 2,500-gallon underground cistern that captures rainwater from their roof to supply water for all landscape irrigation. Maximizing their water efficiency helps reduce their reliance on the municipal water supply and wastewater systems.

Internally, they applied low V.O.C. finishes that contribute to better indoor quality, an energy management system that monitors ventilation and turns off lights when sunlight is bright inside, and high-efficiency appliances that contribute to a 14 percent energy savings. In an effort to reduce energy consumption, Chipotle utilizes all Energy Star-rated kitchen equipment, such as ice machines, fryers, refrigerators and warmers. They designed the building with LED lamps that reduce the amount of heat introduced to the dining room. This particular store has no incandescent lighting. LED lamps contain no mercury and last for thousands of hours.

In addition, Chipotle installed a 6-kilowatt wind turbine that provides up to 5 percent of the restaurant's electricity needs. Wind turbines are highly efficient and generate electricity from a natural, renewable resource, without any hidden social or environmental cost. A highly reflective roof and light-colored concrete reflect the sun and reduce the heat island effect created by the building.

Darden's Efforts

Darden is another organization pushing the envelope for extreme sustainability. The company is aggressively working toward a zerowaste- to-landfill goal. With their sustainable efforts, they diverted more than 140,000 cubic yards of waste from landfills in 2011. Their recycling efforts save approximately 930,000 trees, 500 million gallons of water and more than 300 million kilowatt hours of electricity per year. They also recycle 100 percent of discarded fry oil, which gets used for biodiesel, for animal food and as an ingredient in soaps. Darden has eliminated the use of all polystyrene take-out containers and increased the recycled content and recyclability of all take-out packaging. Cups and take-out bags are now made out of paper or biodegradable materials.

Darden utilizes up-to-date energy management systems in each of their new buildings, enhancing their restaurants with automated lighting, heating and cooling.

The company's goal is to maximize energy efficiency, while maintaining the consistently high level of guest satisfaction.

Since 2008, Darden has reduced its per restaurant energy usage by 7.84 percent. In addition, they installed a 101-megawatt solar energy on the rooftop of their Restaurant Support Center, which is projected to supply 18 percent of their annual energy needs. They converted their "front of house" restaurant lighting to LED bulbs, saving approximately 40,000 kilowatt hours, and completed the conversion of their kitchen area lighting to CFL bulbs. This saves approximately 3,000 kilowatts per year, per restaurant.

Darden has significantly increased their understanding of sustainability and what it takes to achieve zero waste. They are committed to taking a resourcefocused approach to smart, ecological solutions that enhance their vision of affecting their customers and the environment in a positive way.

There are various solutions today that restaurant owners can take advantage of in order to achieve zero waste. Adapting to a zerowaste operation may not happen overnight, but the environmental and cost-effective benefits will reduce your carbon footprint and set a permanent example among your customers and community that will be well worth the effort.

Susan Daywit is the Founder, President and CEO of SLM Facility Solutions Nationwide. Susan is an active member of RFMA and regular contributor to Facilitator.