



A complete guide
to waste reduction in
the restaurant business

By Ray Hatch

It wasn't that long ago that sustainability was a buzzword thrown around like "synergy" or "taking something to the next level."

Over the years, sustainability has gone from a back-burner concern to a mission-critical aspect of how business is done.

The restaurant business, with its increasingly eco-friendly consumer base, is on the forefront of that movement. It's not just about the food anymore; it's about transparency. This includes where food comes from, how it's handled and what happens to it after the sale. It's about shifting your focus to operations and amplifying and expanding sustainable practices to get the absolute most from your waste reduction efforts. Consumers want to spend their money on a brand they trust.

But waste reduction is not just about customer appeal. Reducing waste means reducing costs. Research from REFED and the National Restaurant Association shows that restaurants that work to achieve a zero-waste policy spend less, retain talents and appeal to eco-conscious consumers.

Think Outside of the Trash Can

The restaurant industry has a unique opportunity to harness the sustainability trend and make it a standard business practice. The focus for restaurants always seems to fall, obviously, on food waste—and for good reason. A recent study from *Champion123.org* on the business case for reducing waste shows that "the benefit-to-cost ratio of comprehensive food waste reduction efforts states that every \$1 invested in food waste reduction process results in approximately \$14 of cost savings," which is secured by better ordering, less material paid to be landfilled, a higher retention rate of key talents and acquisition of customers who are willing to pay more. That being said, for a restaurant to truly be "sustainable," waste reduction has to occur across the board—not just with food waste.

The days of being able to check "waste reduction" off your list by simply putting out a recycling bin are long gone. Consumers have shown a growing demand for transparency, and those higher expectations translate into proving that your restaurants implement authentic, comprehensive and effective waste elimination solutions. As you can see from the table

CONSTRUCTION		RENOVATION		BACK OF THE HOUSE OPERATIONS		FRONT OF THE HOUSE OPERATIONS		FOOD DELIVERY	
Concrete		Tiles		Cardboard Boxes		Glass Containers			
Wood		Wood		Plastic Containers		Aluminum Containers			
Mixed Plastics		Cooking, sorting, cleaning, & cooling equipment		Glass Containers		Food Waste (Customers leftovers)			
Cardboard		Branding Elements		Aluminum Containers		Napkin & Tablecloths			
Gypsum		Furniture		Food Waste (trimming, prep, spoilage)		Menu & Table Tents			
Bricks				Used Cooking Oil		Promotional Displays			
Hazardous Waste (paint, aerosols, chemicals, electronics, light-bulbs, batteries, & E-waste)		Hazardous Waste (paint, aerosols, chemicals, electronics, light-bulbs, batteries, & E-waste)		Grease Trap Waste					
				Mixed Paper					
				Uniforms					
Plywood		Pipes		Broken Dining Wares		Individual Packaging		Individual Packaging	
Roofing						Single Use Dining Ware		Single Use Dining Ware	
Pipes									
Electrical Components									
Trash		Trash		Trash		Trash		Trash	

Opportunities for waste reduction: Restaurants generate a lot of waste, but the majority of materials are recyclable.

below, restaurants generate recyclable materials every single day that are often times not even considered.

Deploying Waste Reduction Practices

Understanding that waste reduction has a direct correlation with your bottom line and putting those practices into action are two totally different things.

Deploying an effective waste reduction program isn't as complicated as it sounds.

Understand where you are and where you want to be. When using data from your waste management service providers or data from an internal audit, you need to figure out how much waste you are creating on day one. If you're working with multiple vendors, this can be a daunting task, but it is the only way to see how much work needs to be done.

Optimize ordering. Leverage data from your locations to identify improvements in ordering. Whether it is buying smaller packages of a specific produce to prevent spoilage, or smaller quantities of non-perishables that are stacking up on shelves,

purchasing data is critical to reducing waste. Restaurants should consider leveraging demand-planning software to optimize inventory on hand and minimize over-ordering.

Taking that thought process a step further, look for opportunities that are unique to restaurants. For instance, find produce vendors that offer discounts for produce that doesn't meet "visual standards." If a carrot is going to get peeled into strips, what difference does it make if it is straight? That's an example of a cost-saving purchasing option that eco-conscious consumers absolutely love—along with buying locally sourced goods, products made from recycled materials and materials that are certified as compostable. Those little shifts in purchasing can make huge waves with eco-conscious consumers who are quickly becoming the rule instead of the exception.

Donate, donate, donate. Across the country, you can look in any dumpster at almost any business and find items that could have been donated to a worthwhile cause. Restaurants have the added opportunity to partner with food donation programs that are already in place and have been shown to work. Aside from the social impacts of food donation, restaurants are eligible for tax incentives for donated

Track results



— and brag

foods and are protected by the Good Samaritan Act, which releases them from liabilities associated with donated food.

There are several food donation platforms out there that have been evolving and growing, making donation easier than ever. Between the tax incentives and any donation platform costs, even if the financial impact is a wash, the social impacts are nearly incalculable.

Recycle everything. Businesses are quick to stop looking for things to recycling. The “big three” (plastic, cardboard and paper) are as far as a lot of operations go. In the restaurant business, you’ve got a lot more to consider, as the table on the previous page shows. Using a third-party company, or your own internal teams, keep looking for waste streams that can be diverted.

Train, educate and retain employees. The best, most comprehensive recycling plan in the world won’t survive a team that doesn’t understand it. Every employee—from the C-suite to the fry cooks—needs to understand why the program is in place and how their individual contributions to the plan make a difference. Getting employees invested in the program is what gives it wheels. Offer incentives for adhering to the plan, and share results on a regular basis.

Track results—and brag. At the end of the day, sustainability programs are just as much for saving money as they are for making it. Standing up among your competitors and showing that your operation wastes less makes a statement that resonates with consumers. The market segment of environmentally aware consumers is only growing, and their spending habits are getting more and more refined and focused. By collecting the right data accurately, restaurants have the ability to reach out to this ever-increasing segment of consumers.

Imagine a table tent in each of your restaurants featuring your waste-elimination efforts at each location, or a blurb on each menu with waste reduction stats or ongoing milestones shared on your website and on social media. That kind of marketing has proven valuable for restaurant operations that have taken similar approaches with organic and locally sourced produce. Why not take a business model that is already working a step further? The right vendors and service providers can help your operation collect the data you need to show your customers that your restaurant is making strides to eliminate waste.

Just as sustainability isn’t a passing trend, reducing waste isn’t a passing project. It is something that must be done actively and intelligently. The results speak for themselves. Wasting less means spending less—it really is that simple. Not only do your margins become healthier, but your customers acknowledge those efforts and are more willing to give you repeat business. ■

Ray Hatch is CEO and a member of the board at Quest Resource Management Group. He has more than 25 years of experience in both the waste management and food services industries. Previously, Hatch served as President of Merchants Market Group, an international foodservice distribution company. He also served in various executive roles with Oakleaf Waste Management, a provider of waste outsourcing that was acquired by Waste Management.



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