

Sustainability: The New Watchword in Dining

Companies, colleges, schools seek both eco-benefits and lower costs

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Sustainability – the conservation of the earth’s resources – is competing with the recession and its effects as the topic of the hour at companies and on campuses.

Sustainability encompasses all the green initiatives that have come to the fore in recent years, and more. It includes such diverse areas as energy and water conservation, reuse of furnishings and compressing the workweek, as well as the more familiar topics: waste reduction, recycling, alternative fuels and renewable energy.

Trayless on Campus

Some sustainability initiatives dovetail nicely with the recession-inspired need to reduce costs. The growing “trayless” trend in college and independent school all-you-can-eat dining halls is a good example. When trays are eliminated, food waste declines by 25% to 30% per person, a study by Aramark Corp’s Higher Education division found, *Restaurants & Institutions* reports. The cost of tray replacements also is eliminated, Tom Post, president of Sodexo Campus Services told *R&I*. The eco-benefits include reduced water, energy and dishwashing chemical consumption.

Other sustainability initiatives require a longer view. Replacing inefficient older equipment is an immediate expense, but reduces gas, electric and water consumption, all important ecological and financial benefits over time.

Squeezing Pennies, Saving Dollars

As sales decline and costs rise, dining service operators are looking for ways to squeeze out even small savings without hurting customers’ perceptions of value.

At a Clarion client with a busy conference catering service, reducing the choice of snacks at morning and afternoon refreshment breaks has cut food cost for these services by some 20%.

Villanova University’s Dining Service Director Tim Dietzler has “evaluated our top 200 volume items [to find] equal quality at lower costs [and is] assessing higher-processed items . . . and comparing them to lower-processed items,” *FoodService Director* reports.

“We’re controlling portions more carefully,” Lisa Wandel, director of residential dining at Penn State University, told *FSD*. “We’re . . . talking to our servers . . . because they can really make or break us if they have a heavy hand.”

Sustainable Master Planning

The number of companies and institutions that are following a master plan to implement sustainable initiatives has more than doubled since 2002 to 17% from 8% among respondents to a survey conducted by the International Facilities Management Assn. Another 65% are implementing green building concepts without a master plan, they said in the survey.

The major sustainability initiatives respondents report are recycling (90%), energy conservation (85%), waste reduction, (67%), and water conservation (54%). Respondents with dining service operations said recycling plastic and aluminum, use of recycled napkins, non-plastic eating utensils, local purchasing and changes in takeout containers are their primary efforts.

“Procedural changes in food service preparation” and composting food waste were reported by 9% of respondents for each. Some said they recycle fryer oil or substitute mugs for paper cups.

Of 573 respondents to the worldwide survey, 74% were in the U.S., and 12% were educational or other institutions.

Colleges Lead

The most impressive gains on the sustainability front are made on college and university campuses, where students are often in the forefront, or at least eager participants.

At the University of California-Davis, for example, the dining services participate in the campus-wide “4R” campaign (reduce, reuse, recycle, re-buy). The result has been an increase in the amount of waste diverted from landfill to other uses from 40% in 1999 to 70% in 2008, according to the university website. Some 10,000 tons of organic waste was composted or used by local farmers as fertilizer, the university says.

The dining service, operated by Sodexo, aims for “zero waste” at catered events by using china instead of disposables and bulk beverages in place of bottles or cans, among other steps. They also buy fresh food locally to the extent possible and have an extensive recycling program.

Getting More from Less

Replacing inefficient cooking equipment and refrigeration units is an expensive proposition, especially in the current down economy, but can have a big payoff in energy savings, as well as being good for the environment.

“The question isn’t where you will be in six months from now, but in six years,” says Don Fisher, manager of the PSE&G Food Service Technology Center, San Ramon, CA, writing in *Trade Talk Quarterly*.

Equipment testing at the Tech Center demonstrates that the more effectively an appliance delivers heat to the cooking medium or surface, the faster and more evenly it cooks the product, Fisher says. For example, an 80,000 Btu per hour Energy Star-rated electric deep fat fryer produces as much food as a 130,000 Btu gas-fired unit at a much lower energy cost. An Energy Star steamer needs only a few gallons of water, vs. 20 to 80 gallons for a conventional steamer, according to Fisher.

Quick Payoff

An equipment investment can have a quick payoff. A Tech Center field test found a restaurant operator saved \$2,000 in water and \$3,000 in electricity costs in one year, compared to the prior conventional unit, according to Fisher.

The Tech Center website (*fishnick.com*) provides information about energy-efficient kitchen equipment and a “life cycle energy cost calculator” for comparing your existing equipment to Energy Star models.

Clarion will help you plan and design a more sustainable and cost-effective dining service and facility. Contact Tom Mac Dermott, FCSI, president, 603/642-8011 • TWM@clariongp.com or Angela Phelan, 973/763-7933 • ALP@clariongp.com.