

Such a Waste

A Sustainable Packaging Primer

Earth Day is celebrated in April; however, as responsible independent operators, we must consider our effect on the environment 12 months a year. In this article, we look at some best practices to reduce the waste stream of our businesses. This is more critical than ever, as delivery and takeout sales continue to climb.

By Lindsey Danis

Food packaging and containers accounted for 28.1 percent of municipal solid waste in 2018, for a total of 82.2 million tons, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (“Facts and Figures about Materials, Waste and Recycling”). This category includes plastic, cardboard and paperboard, glass, aluminum and plastic. Restaurant operators who care about their carbon footprint can find sustainable alternatives, including recyclable and compostable takeout containers. However, due diligence requires research of what is recyclable or compostable within your community.

But It’s More Complicated Than Meets the Eye

Is recyclable or compostable the greener choice? That’s what many operators want to know, but Mi-

chael Oshman, founder and CEO of the Green Restaurant Association cautions that it’s more complicated than that.

“When you get takeout packaging, it’s nice to get something that is going to be recycled for sure but where did it come from? #1 or #2 plastic might be easily recyclable, but it is also likely made from virgin petroleum. There are two issues to consider. First, where did it come from and where is it going? We want to avoid it going to a landfill and instead, go to a place where it’s going to be made into a new product, recyclable or compostable,” he says.

“Most recycling rates are unimpressive,” Oshman adds. You can’t rely on other people to do the right thing. So rather than buy a #1 or #2 container that is easily recyclable but made from virgin petroleum, Oshman recommends using 100% post-consumer



waste plastic containers. This way, you know you've done good for the environment.

Regardless how judicious you are with straws and condiments; you've still got to package food for off-premises dining. Making a green choice is harder than you might think.

Containers that tend to be recyclable include:

- ✓ #1 and #2 plastic clamshell containers can sometimes be recycled.
- ✓ Aluminum containers with the pinch-to-seal seam can be recycled when clean, but their foil-lined paper tops must go in the trash.
- ✓ Paper containers, when uncontaminated by food residue, can be recycled.
- ✓ Paper bags used to hold takeout orders can be recycled.
- ✓ Plastic bags used to hold takeout orders can be recycled at most grocery stores.

However, every community or municipality sets its own guidelines as to what can and can't be recycled. Rather than

assume something can be recycled or composted, you actually have to check if it is recyclable or compostable in your community. Unless your community offers municipal composting, those compostable containers are likely destined for the landfill where they won't break down.

According to Napa, California-based Napa Recycling & Waste Services, aluminum is the easiest for recycling centers to recycle. Soiled takeout containers, such as greasy pizza boxes, are not recyclable (but may be compostable) even if they are made from material that is otherwise recyclable, like cardboard. Soiled glass or plastic containers that have food residue can be recycled if they are cleaned. In either case, you're relying on a customer to know these subtle distinctions and do the right thing when disposing of the packaging.

Then there are containers that look recyclable but aren't. For example, those ubiquitous black plastic takeout containers with the clear lid are generally not recyclable because of the technologies used by recycling centers. Plastic-sorting facilities rely on near infrared radiation to sort plastics. Since black and other dark colors absorb light, they're unable to be sorted.



Exceptions like these make it all the more challenging for eco-minded operators to make good choices. Given

"Most recycling rates are unimpressive," Oshman adds. You can't rely on other people to do the right thing. So rather than buy a #1 or #2 container that is easily recyclable but made from virgin petroleum, Oshman recommends using 100-percent post-consumer waste plastic containers. "This way, you know you've done good for the environment."

these difficulties, Oshman encourages operators to focus on making purchasing choices that are sustainable rather than relying on their customers to make environmental choices.

When you buy something made from recycled material – even if that container may not be recycled by a diner – you've already done a good thing, he says.

The Green Restaurant Association has a shopping directory on their website to guide your search. Found under the "Find Products" tab at dinegreen.com, this directory lists disposable takeout containers by category, such as bowls, food trays, or napkins. Two companies that stand out are WOW Plastics and Bio-Plus Earth.

Bio-Plus Earth products are compostable in commercial facilities and designed for hot, cold, wet, and dry food storage. Steam can vent from the container to preserve the integrity of food, and containers are microwave safe for end-use reheating. Bio-Plus Earth containers are made from 35% post-consumer waste.

WOW Plastics options include clam shells, cake domes, and salad bowls made from 100% post-consumer waste plastic. Products listed in the Green Restaurant Association's directory have been vetted for the claim on the certification. If the manufacturer claims it's 100% post-consumer

IS REUSABILITY THE ANSWER?

Michael Oshman, founder and CEO of the Green Restaurant Association, believes that reusable items are the real answer to the sustainability question. While most concepts use reusables on-premises, new programs are making it a possible choice for off-premises dining, too. Oshman says the Green Restaurant Association is in the middle of investigating reusable services to recommend to their customers. "They're really new, but there is much more now than there was a year ago," he says.

Boston-based Usefull (usefull.us) is one service on his radar. Usefull offers stainless steel to-go cups and bowls that consumers can check out and return using an app. Consumers get a free trial period. Usefull started as a corporate initiative and expanded to college campuses.

Through a DoorDash and Caviar partnership with Deliver Zero, diners can search for delivery options that can be packaged in reusable containers. There is an "eco-friendly packaging" option in the menu. Customers can add DeliverZero Reusable Containers to their order for a \$0.99 surcharge. Diners will receive the order in reusable containers which can be returned to any other restaurant in the Deliver Zero network.

If the idea of reusable takeout containers seems limited to big cities, consider college town New Paltz, New York, which is currently piloting a reusables program that uses tiffin boxes, which are traditionally used in India for food delivery.

In the first phase, the town's Climate Smart Task Force promoted the initiative to individu-

Continued to Page 25

plastic waste, they've checked the chain of custody to show these claims are accurate, Oshman explains.

The Green Restaurant Association vets manufacturers to assure that they are not "greenwashing" or making false claims about environmental benefit before including them

in its directory. The association also provides consulting on developing an integrated approach to reducing restaurant waste streams.

"We can help them take an experience where trial and error can be months or years" and turn it into days, says Oshman. The organization can consult around best-choice containers, challenges, solutions, and how to communicate the benefit to employees and customers. "We find out all the containers they're using" and whether a container needs to insulate to heat or cold.

"We give them a detailed report [that says] for this product you're using, now you want that product. If they don't like something, we can give them another option," says Oshman. Since they know the distributor the restaurant uses, they recommend the best sustainable alternatives their distributor offers.

The Green Restaurant Association's marketing department can "help them communicate digitally in house on menus so consumers will feel better about it. The change becomes part of branding, and we help them tell a story," Oshman explains.

"We are an environmental organization, but we only work with restaurants, that's all we do. The head of the department is a former restaurant owner. We speak their language and they get that right away. They get that we're here to help and we know the complexities," Oshman says when discussing why customers feel comfortable taking their recommendation.

Oshman believes it doesn't need to be hard to go green. It can be easy and fun, particularly when there's someone offering advice that is tailored to an operator's business and concerns. Better yet, it can be profitable. You can build a restaurant that is thriving, even more than before it became environmentally sustainable, Oshman says. As you make eco-friendly changes and see their impact, you can be motivated to do more.

Overcoming Consumer Confusion

In its report, "Ensuring the Success of Compostable Packaging", The Sustainable Packaging Coalition outlines barriers facing widespread adoption of compostable packaging. The report indicates takeaway containers are a source of "consumer confusion", given some items are designed to be recycled and others composted. When compostable and non-compostable items look similar, consumers can end up putting a recyclable container in the compost bin and vice versa.

The coalition believes consumers are also confused about the difference between biodegradable and compostable, how and where to compost, and the purpose of compostable containers. This confusion suggests that even eco-minded customers aren't necessarily sure they're doing the right thing, or even why it matters.

They're not helped by the current inconsistencies surrounding compostable packaging or even what 'compostable' means. "Some states are creating their own definitions for what packaging will be considered compostable, or may set unique rules for how products should be labeled," the report explains.

Olga Kachook, director of bioeconomy and reuse initiatives at the Sustainable Packaging Coalition, says the compostable packaging industry is aligning around standards in the hopes of helping compostable packaging become more easily identifiable to customers. Kachook mentions elements like "green or brown tinting, striping, and embossing, as well as the BPI certified compostable logo" that set compostable containers apart from disposables.

Kachook references How2Compost, an organization that claims as its mission "to take the guesswork out of composting". Similar to the successful How2Recycle program, How2Compost uses package labels with links to educate consumers on the best way to dispose of compostable packaging. Brands including McDonalds have partnered with How2Compost.

To address barriers to access, Kachook says the compostable packaging industry is engaged in state and federal advocacy with groups including the US Composting Council and the Plant Based Products Council. A newly proposed Senate bill, S.3743 - Recycling and Composting Accountability Act, introduced March 3, 2022 by Senator Thomas Carper (D-DE), includes provisions to expand composting infrastructure. If it becomes law, this bill would require the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to collect data on recycling and composting infrastructure, best practices, labeling, education and markets.

"Restaurant operators are a critical link in the chain when it comes to making sure compostable packaging actually gets composted," Kachook says. While operators can guide customers to properly dispose of compostable items and food waste when food is eaten on-premises, there is little they can do once food goes home with customers.

Compostable containers are a nice touch when food is eaten on-premises, for example in a fast-casual concept that is majority dine-in. For operators seeking a sustainable solution for takeout and delivery containers, it's hard to call composting the best choice given the barriers to successful implementation. Most municipalities do not have compost programs to get compostable items to a commercial composting facility where they can break down.

Oshman says compostable containers work well in certain scenarios, most notably "closed-loop environments" where food is purchased and disposed of onsite. Oshman gives the example of a stadium that wants to be

Continued from Page 24

als by selling tiffin containers at cost. (Tiffins are food containers specifically made for transporting food and are not made for baking or cooking.) "We have gained consumer interest having sold hundreds of tiffins to local people and now we are getting some 'all in' restaurants to promote them as well," says New Paltz Climate Smart Coordinator Janelle Peotter, who calls the level of acceptance of the initiative "exciting." The local restaurant health inspector has approved of the plan, and four local restaurants have committed to stocking tiffins to sell to customers.

"When customers bring tiffins to restaurants, almost all of them are happy to fill the tiffin instead of using single-use packaging. Ultimately, we would like to move towards a tiffin exchange program where customers can bring their washed-at-home tiffin to the restaurant and get their take-out order in a restaurant sterilized tiffin," Peotter adds. Peotter mentions how easily stainless steel can be sterilized in a commercial dishwasher and compares it to buying milk in glass bottles.

The New Paltz example illustrates some of the challenges to reusables, including washing and redistribution. As Oshman sums up, "We've got to have a system to wash and redistribute [containers] back to the restaurants. It needs to be convenient so the consumer doesn't have 50 different containers from 50 different restaurants." Despite logistical questions, Oshman is excited that it's happening and says there's been an enormous amount of growth on this front in the past year alone.

zero waste. They can compost food waste and purchase compostable silverware, napkins, and plates. "The customer sticks it in the bin, not because they're making great decisions, but because they can't make the wrong decision," he explains.

'BURGER AND FRIES, HOLD THE PLASTIC'

Michael Oshman, founder and CEO of the Green Restaurant Association, believes a focus on recyclable packaging obscures a smarter and cheaper option: reducing how much packaging your concept uses. Oshman recommends training staff to ask on every order whether the guests need straws, napkins, utensils, or condiments. Ideally, he says, this option is integrated into online ordering systems, as some third-party delivery companies have done.

Oshman believes if a guest is prompted, they're more likely to decline items they don't need. Not only is reducing the use of disposables eco-friendly, but it can save operators as much as \$5,000 a year, Oshman estimates.

TALK THE TALK A BRIEF RESTAURANT SUSTAINABILITY GLOSSARY

Biodegradable. Something that will break down into natural elements at the end of its useful life.

Compostable. Something that will break down into humus, a nutrient-rich organic material, at the end of its useful life.

Disposable. Anything intended to be used once and disposed of, including by recycling or composting.

Post-consumer recyclable. Something recycled after consumer use, such as recycled paper or plastic that's been made into something new.

Pre-consumer recyclable. Something recycled before being given to consumers, such as manufacturing waste that is made into something new.

Reusable. Items that can be reused, including reusable takeout and delivery containers.

Oshman notes that many operators have switched to compostable containers then excitedly spread the word to media and consumers about their switch to compostable products. Yet most of these containers are going to homes or offices where they will be thrown in the garbage "not because the consumer doesn't want to do the right thing, but because they can't," says Oshman.

The owners of Anchor, an American comfort food concept in Kingston, New York, explained, "We try to use all compostable containers. Sometimes due to recent supply issues, we have had to find alternatives, but we make every effort to do what we can." Like many concepts, The Anchor decided to switch to compostable containers out of a belief it was the right thing to do. They take other sustainable actions, including composting food waste through a regional compost company. They're proud of what they do and want to share this positive news with their audience. But Kingston doesn't have citywide composting, which means that Anchor customers who order a to-go burger don't have a way to get that eco-friendly packaging to a composting facility where it can break down. Instead, those containers will end up in the landfill.

Compostable containers can work for your concept if there is citywide composting, because consumers can dispose of the container in their municipal compost bin and it will go to a facility where it can break down. Cities like Portland, Oregon; San Francisco, California; and Boulder, Colorado come to mind, though even small cities like Kingston, New York have indicated interest in developing municipal compost programs.

Shopping Tips

Assuming compostable containers can work for your concept, what should you keep in mind when shopping for them? The US Composting Council recommends choosing compostable products that are certified to a standard such as ASTM International. Products that are certified to ASTM standards have been tested for heavy metals, plant toxicity, and the ability of component parts to break down into organic materials.

Kachook encourages operators to choose "certified compostable packaging that is clearly and prominently labeled." She adds, "while green or brown tinting or large compostability messaging may not be part of a restaurant's brand," Kachook says operators should be flexible and adopt packaging that conforms to the standards, as consumers are learning to associate these elements with compostability.

Kachook recommends staying away from packaging that is labeled biodegradable: "This only further confuses consumers." Kachook suggests operators who choose compostable containers avoid recyclable containers, so consumers don't accidentally recycle the compostable container and vice versa.

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