



Sustainability is Here to Stay

That was the message from last week's Northwest Sustainability Discovery Tour in Portland

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The Pacific Northwest has long been acknowledged as the forefront of the sustainable food movement, and last week a small but dedicated group from across the foodservice industry gathered in Portland, Oregon, to learn how to make all aspects of the business more environmentally friendly.

The Northwest Sustainability Discover Tour, presented by canned foods producer Truitt Brothers, drew restaurateurs, manufacturers, marketers, and media from across the country. Though participants came from a variety of backgrounds, each shared one common belief: Sustainability is more than just a trend.

In fact, 93 percent of consumers say they want to be sustainable, according to a recent study from market research firm the Hartman Group. The problem is that only 5 percent say they can identify a sustainable company and 12 percent a sustainable product. Hartman Group Managing Director Alison Worthington, a speaker at the event, believes that presents an opportunity for companies to help consumers indulge their desire to purchase green.

The key, she says, is to give them the tools to participate in the sustainability movement without cutting down on convenience. An example comes from curbside recycling: As soon as consumers had someone else to haul their recyclables to the facility, uptake was much more successful.

Just greening your operation, though, isn't enough. Worthington says you also have to link your efforts to a story so customers are aware of what you're doing. Once they are, it can really pay off, with consumers willing to pay a 10-percent premium for sustainable products.

But you've got to do more than talk the talk. Savvy customers are becoming increasingly aware of greenwashing, when companies make false or misleading claims about their sustainability efforts. It's important to provide proof that your business is sustainable, and one way to do that is seek out ecolabels, or certification backing up your claims.

The best kind of certification, explains Matthew Buck, assistant director at Food Alliance, a certifier of green agricultural and business practices, comes from a third, neutral party. Anyone, he says, can make a first-party claim, such as "free-range" or "natural", but only a third party can provide a label that puts weight behind the words. If your suppliers don't currently participate in sustainability certification, use your purchasing power to let them know it's important to you and your customers.

Sustainability isn't always black and white, though, explains Rita Schenck, executive director of the Institute for Environmental Research and Education. Sometimes what you think is best for the environment isn't at all.

“There’s not a lot of science behind a lot of sustainability claims,” Schenck says, who holds a doctorate in oceanography and has spent many years managing environmental programs.

The problem, she says, is that most focus only on a short span in the life of products, such as their disposal. But life cycle assessments, or LCAs, are a way to consider a broad range of environmental impacts a product can have throughout its entire life cycle: from the sourcing of the raw materials used to make it, through its transport, use, and, finally, disposal.

Take, for instance, the paper versus plastic bags debate. Retailers such as Whole Foods and even entire cities such as San Francisco have banned the non-biodegradable plastic variety in the name of saving the environment. But according to Schenck, who sits on the executive committee of the American Center for Life Cycle Assessment, a non-profit organization that seeks to build capacity and knowledge of LCAs, that’s not necessarily such a good thing.

An LCA conducted on non-recycled paper bags shows that because they require the cutting down of trees for materials, are heavier to transport, and release greenhouse gases when they decompose in landfills, they can actually be worse for the environment than plastic bags, which are made from an already-existing byproduct of petroleum, are lighter to transport, and don’t release greenhouse gases in landfills.

“I am scared we are paying attention to things that don’t matter,” Schenck says.

Because LCAs take a holistic approach to considering environmental impact, Schenck considers them the best way to evaluate a product’s sustainability. Others are starting to agree, too. Wal-Mart is conducting LCAs for some of its products, and the U.S. Green Building Council has announced that it intends to incorporate LCAs in its LEED Certification Program for green buildings.

Restaurants can get involved, too. In fact, says Schenck, there’s a lot they can do. Forty percent of food in the United States is thrown away—mostly in a foodservice environment—and that burdens all food delivered with up to 80 percent more environmental impact. Serving smaller portions to minimize waste is one way to help.

But sustainability isn’t just about the environment. It’s also about people. Burgerville’s practice of buying from sustainable and local suppliers—though it does cost more—has helped sustain family farms and ranches, says Chief Cultural Officer Jack Graves. And in the end it pays off.

“Keeping the local dollars local...has people see our product as having a lot more value than our competitors,” he says.

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