

# Fast Casual Restaurant Summit: Sustainability Matters

Panelists Discuss What It Means to Consumers



Sustainability has gotten an increasing amount of press in the past couple of years, much of it confusing. Consumers say sustainable products and companies are important to them, and that they favor sustainable restaurants when given a choice. The challenge for many restaurateurs is that sustainability as a concept covers many different areas in business. It could be related to employee sustainability, financial sustainability, using sustainable products and/or operating a sustainable building—daunting on any given day.

One of the final panel presentations at the Fast Casual Executive Summit dealt with the issue of sustainability, approaching it from three different perspectives: manufacturing sustainable products, operating a sustainable restaurant, and looking at sustainability from the consumer perspective in terms of hot buttons for them.

## **Truitt: Clarity Is key**

Peter Truitt, CEO, Truitt Bros., an Oregon-based manufacturer of shelf-stable, sustainable food products, discussed the two sides of sustainability—your practices and the way you communicate to the consumer. Both are imperative for success. “You can do everything possible to be sustaining, but if your customers don’t know or are confused by your language, it will do you no good.” Truitt believes consumers most definitely speak the language of sustainability, but that they approach it in terms of “purity,” “nutritional value,” “natural,” “free of pesticides and hormones,” and so forth. He believes that menu ethics will be one of the most significant hot buttons in the future, with clear labeling and description standards for food being the norm.



What sustainability means to Truitt Bros. is product integrity and nutritional value, reduced use of toxins and hazardous materials; reduced resource consumption through recycling and conservation; quality control, and safe and fair working conditions; all wrapped together by continuous improvement processes. Truitt says the company is audited and certified sustainable by the Food Alliance and maintaining that certification year-by-year means Truitt Bros. is constantly updating knowledge and refreshing programs to maintain that certification.

So how do you communicate to consumers if they’re confused by the term “sustainability”? “When you tell a customer where the food comes from, how it’s made and the process it’s gone through to get to the table, they understand that,” Truitt says. “Listen to their language. Consumers describe healthy food as real food and fresh food. Quality ingredients are a powerful menu cue that connects with patrons. Being transparent in your actions and communications is the best first step – transparent about your sources and your company’s values.”

## **Harvey: Sustainability = smart business**

Jeff Harvey, president and CEO of Burgerville Restaurants, believes sustainability is smart business. “It generates a return, develops economic vitality, attracts exceptionally passionate

talent, differentiates you from others and helps you develop the skills and capabilities you need to compete.”

The local impact of sustainability programs is phenomenal. “Sustainability impacts people development,” he says, “creating sustainable leaders and ensuring their well-being. You impact local food supply by using local, fresh sustainable and accessible food. It also impacts local energy consumption. The restaurant industry is one of the most energy intensive around. Being a sustainable company means we are committed to looking for alternative energy sources like wind and solar power and biofuel sources. We conserve and restore what we use.”

Burgerville has reaped the human capital benefits sustainability can bring. Harvey says the chain has watched management turnover fall from 130% to 35%. In addition, crew turnover has been lowered from 150% to 60%. “The results in terms of employees, finance, community impact, and the products we serve all speak to the power sustainable programs deliver.”

Kate Geagan, M.S., R.D., is a dietitian who counsels consumers and the food industry on healthier eating and lifestyles, and has her ear trained to the consumer syntax when it comes to sustainability. “I’m here today to tell you what I hear from consumers when it comes to sustainability,” Geagan said.



Consumer interest in food is at an all time high. That interest will continue to be driven higher as we continue to learn the impact food has on our well-being. Geagan says the next generation will be the first in which the children are not expected to outlive their parents. She says the old paradigm in terms of food was taste/cost/value/efficiency. The new paradigm is quality ingredients/health/authenticity of ingredients/sustainability/green.

### **Geagan: Consumers want to do the right thing**

According to Geagan, at the end of the day, consumers want to do the right thing. They want it to be so easy that, ideally, someone else does the work for them. They want eating healthy and eating sustainable to feel good. It has to be positive, not based in fear. Consumers want to know their exact impact. If I do this, what is the direct benefit to me, to my community, to the nation?”

How do we emotionally connect with consumers? Geagan feels sustainability offers a fresh, new and very real point of opportunity to engage consumers, and frame the conversation in such a way that it builds brand loyalty. Even with the economy as it is, she reports, research shows that respondents still buy green, with 26 percent saying they buy even more today.

Other hot buttons with consumers are simplicity, purity and transparency—simple foods, clearly labeled with reduced processing. “Your future consumers are going to be conscious eaters,” Geagan says. “They’ll want food that’s good for them and their families. They want green, not greenwashing.” She also feels that 3rd party certification is imperative for instilling consumer confidence through organizations such as the Green Restaurant Association, Food Alliance Certification and the USDA.

As you can see, sustainability has many angles. It’s important to decide where you, as an individual, business, community, etc., fall within the sustainability spectrum. All panelists emphasized the need for authenticity, transparency and commitment. Sustainability is a long-term strategy, not a short term tactical fix.