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The nature of sustainability

13 Jan 2009 - Rebecca Barnes, contributing writer

For quick-service restaurateurs who want to make sense of the greening of the market, the issues of sustainability are important. But, lest anyone think they have the puzzle figured out, it's crucial to realize that the environment is only one layer of the sustainability strata.

Consumers, especially young ones, are learning how to think holistically about not only their food, but where it comes from and the impact it has on the environment and other people. They crave this information, and if operators want to continue strengthening QSRs' connection with consumers, they must get educated about sustainability as well.

Researchers at The Hartman Group list six key values that consumers identify under the umbrella term of sustainability: healthy, local, socially responsible, environmentally responsible, promotes simple living and controlled.

That's a big list for even a nearly perfect restaurant, and one that, according to Allison Worthington, managing director of sustainability for the Hartman Group, may only be executable on a local level.

But larger restaurants need not despair, since nearly any concept can enter the sustainability stream in some way, and chains can adapt what works for a local eatery.

"What we find for retail and foodservice is that sustainability is really more about the front-end factors," Worthington said. "Not everything has to be organic or local."

Waste not, want not

Recycling and composting are among the nearly dozen guidelines from the Green Restaurant Association (GRA), an independent, nonprofit certification group. Taking advantage of local glass, plastic, metal, cardboard, paper, grease, ink and toner recycling is one piece of the green pie for a restaurant.

One way Patrick Fox, chef and owner at Cava Greens in Denver, utilizes recycling is by offering a discount to customers who bring their own bowl. He says some 25 percent of the customers at one of his stores participate in the B.Y.O.B. discount, and that number could increase with more communication and more training.

"It's like remembering to pack your mug when you go to the coffee shop in the morning. It's training the people," he said.

And it's not just about recycling materials. According to the GRA, food waste — a major part of restaurant garbage — "can be diverted from landfills and made into nutrient-rich soil through the use of a composting service or an on-site system."

On the other end of recycling, green restaurants also use more products made from recycled materials, either post-consumer or post-industrial waste.

And reusing or reducing materials altogether is gaining ground on recycling efforts. Some restaurateurs are even giving cloth napkins, ceramic cups and dishes, glassware and metal flatware a second look.

Earth, wind, fire and water

While solar power may be the biggest change for businesses looking to save energy and money, the initial cost for most systems requires a long-term commitment, not only to the environment but also to eventually recouping the cost through attracting more green customers.

Other alternative energy sources also can be effective, however, and can offer more affordable ways for restaurants to make their first foray into the eco-friendly movement. For example, wind power is becoming more available to mainstream retailers such as REI and Coldwater Creek. It only follows that restaurants can tap into this alternative grid as well.

Even easier than alternative power is passive solar energy. Restaurants can take advantage of more natural light through windows and skylights, to help reduce both the usage and cost of electricity and gas for a restaurant and to help with heating and cooling costs by regulating shade and sun.

The building itself also is a concern. Recycled or sustainable building materials such as bamboo, cork and even old tires can be used in ways that both save money and help conserve the earth. Companies looking to build or remodel should check the LEED specifications for green buildings before taking the plunge.

Eco-friendly furnishings made of recycled resources, reclaimed wood or other materials that impact the environment are another way to make an operation more sustainable.

People matter too

With all the buzz about the environment, operators sometimes miss what is equally important to consumers — people.

The human factor is part of the definition of sustainability, according to Scott Exo, executive director of Food Alliance, a national nonprofit that works to create market incentives for sustainable agriculture.

"We need to think more broadly if we want to provide safe, healthy, affordable and delicious food for all citizens and better livelihoods for farmers and farm workers, all with less impact on our soils, water, and climate," he wrote for Sustainable Food News.

One simple way for any restaurant to become more socially conscious is to use Fair Trade coffee or other Fair Trade certified foods. These sustain the livelihoods of people — specifically the farmers and workers Exo talks about.

The human factor also involves those closer to home. Fair wages and benefits for employees in the restaurant help make human resources more sustainable. Beyond that, good customer service may be the simplest way to create a more sustainable restaurant, since research shows people think their fellow man matters just as much as the environment.

"To be honest, consumers think social responsibility is equally as important as environmental responsibility," Worthington said. "What you have to say is 'We want to be a more responsible company.'"

Sustainability is about nothing if it isn't about a full-circle consideration of nearly every part of restaurant operations. And making that consideration requires a holistic view of the operation, which must include concern about where food comes from, reducing waste and supporting the people involved in and affected by the ways a restaurant operates across the spectrum.

Easy ways to be (and save) green now:

1. Serve smaller portions — According to Rita Schenk, executive director of the Institute for Environmental Research and Education, a whopping 40 percent of food in the United States is thrown away, primarily in the foodservice environment. "Serving smaller portions to minimize waste is one way to help," she said.

2. Package food with less waste — Plastic and Styrofoam are out. Recycled paper, recyclable foil, compostable and reusable containers are in. According to The Hartman Group's Worthington, packaging is a critical area and simple starting point for restaurants looking for more sustainability.
3. Quality ingredients — Worthington said every single thing on the menu doesn't have to be organic or from a local farm "but feature items that might be." She also encourages restaurants to tell the story of fresh food when they have it.