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It's Good to be Green: How to Have an Environmentally Friendly Restaurant

by Diana Lambdin Meyer and W. R. Griffin

Your top five New Year's resolutions for your startup restaurant this year might include cutting costs, improving staff morale and productivity, increasing customer loyalty, expanding your customer base, and generating good publicity.

Chances are, adopting environmentally friendly business practices -- aka "Going Green" -- probably isn't anywhere near the top of your list, even if you consider yourself an environmentally friendly guy or gal. When you're in the startup phase your focus is staying in business, and all eyes turn toward building sales and income.

But even if you're not an unabashed tree hugger, you can't ignore the environmental effect of dwindling renewable resources, rising energy costs, and the effect of chemicals and debris on the landscape. From a philosophical perspective, there is no "downside" to going green; however, for a startup restaurateur, the nagging question remains: Is it possible to manage a profitable restaurant while respecting environmental concerns?

A number of folks argue that not only is it possible, but, in fact, "going green" can cut costs, improve efficiency and help build your visibility in the community. Your fellow restaurateurs have found ways to reduce water and electrical usage, employ chemical-free cleaners, minimize waste and recycle remaining waste products, and/or purchase sustainable food products -- all the while thriving as businesses.

How the Right Thing to Do Became the Right Way to Go

Frances Bramlett and her partner Dana Sinkler with the Palmetto Food Group in Charleston, South Carolina, began looking into sustainable design elements in the construction of their fourth Just Fresh Bakery Café & Market because it was simply the right thing to do and it complemented the restaurants' healthy living menu options.

But almost immediately, the cost savings became a huge motivating factor to do as much as possible to incorporate green standards in all of their properties. One of the first major savings came with the decision to install waterless urinals. These fixtures cost between $350 and $500 each, with an additional installation price of about $100, including hardware and labor. Those and other water-saving features in one of their units save about 130,000 gallons of water a year.

However, before the first water bill arrived at Just Fresh, Bramlett and Sinkler saved almost $10,000 on the environmental impact fee paid to the city of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, simply because of the anticipated water savings to the municipal water and waste system. "We were just blown away with that," Bramlett says. "We had to spend a little more upfront on some

of the lighting and bathroom fixtures, but the short-term and long-term savings are quickly adding up."

For example, Bramlett says the lighting fixtures cost about $20,000 more than in previous locations. However, she estimates that particular store is saving about $800 a month on the electric bill. In about two years, that investment will be paid for and the savings will continue for the life of the building.

Their 4,500-square-foot Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, location opened July 8, 2004, and in May 2005 became the first chain restaurant in the country to receive the United States Green Buildings Council's (USGBC) "Green Building" certificate. To encourage participation in USGBC's standards, many states and municipalities now offer tax rebates and other incentives for USGBC-certified projects, which is how the $10,000 savings for Just Fresh came to be.

Other environmentally responsible design elements of the Mount Pleasant Just Fresh include the use of wheat board in cabinets and fixtures as opposed to plywood or particleboard. Wheat board meets all building codes, yet is made of abundantly renewable wheat straw rather than wood products. The formaldehyde-free binder of wheat board reduces hazardous emissions within an establishment. "We are now certainly an advocate for sustainable design and will push it with other franchisees," Bramlett says.

Positive Feedback From Customers and Employees

In 2003, the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, a large multiunit operation based in Los Angeles, contracted with the Green Restaurant Association (GRA) to put in place initiatives in about 30 locations (For more information on the GRA, see "Informational Resources for Greening Your Startup" below). That contract has now expanded to 64 units. The four goals established following the initial GRA assessment included recycling, installing low-flow spray valves, purchasing chlorine-free paper products, and using energy-efficient light bulbs.

Of the original 30 locations, 28 are now GRA-certified, which means all of the initiatives have been met and those properties are moving on to a higher level of environmental conservation. The restaurants now proudly display a GRA certification on the door and on all printed material.

While there have been many positives to the partnership with GRA, Melissa Borrego, assistant director of retail communications for Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, says the feedback from customers and employees is most gratifying.

"Customers and team members that see us doing this give us great positive feedback via customer comment cards and employee meetings," Borrego says. "People who are really conscious of this sort of thing are very excited."

Although the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf has no figures to back up her assumption, Borrego "has a strong feeling" that employee turnover has decreased in these stores and that productivity has improved. "Our team members tell us they are proud to be working for this company because of these environmental efforts, so we can assume that pays off by them staying with us longer," she says.

Borrego says that many team members have suggested additional conservation efforts not in the GRA plan, and have taken personal time to research the potential in individual communities. Getting a team member to serve as the point person at each restaurant and getting the general manager on board are keys to success, she says.

Among the obstacles facing stores, particularly in the Los Angeles area, is lack of space for external recycling bins at properties where trash storage is shared with other businesses. When that occurs, Borrego is pleased that GRA takes the initiative to communicate with the property owner and neighboring businesses to develop alternatives. When a solution is agreed upon, GRA also contacts the trash and recycling hauling services and negotiates on behalf of Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, leaving the restaurant manager free to focus on the day-to-day details of the business.

"I think most of our GMs (general managers) will tell you that implementing some of these standards has not created any additional work for them whatsoever," Borrego says. "It's been a really great learning experience for all of us."

When Educated Consumers Ask Tough Questions

Christ Shake's family has been in the seafood restaurant business in the Fisherman's Wharf and Cannery Row area in Monterey for more than 50 years. But in the last five or six years, Shake began to notice customers coming into the family's four restaurants and asking questions about how various fish were harvested. If the restaurant staff didn't know the answer, or if it was an answer that was not environmentally sound, those customers would simply walk out the door. This scenario was happening a couple of times a week, resulting in several hundreds of dollars of lost business, so Shake began to take seriously the concept of sustainable seafood. That was a good thing, since down the street the Monterey Bay Aquarium was educating visitors about the "Seafood Watch" program that promotes the protection of ocean wildlife and ecosystems with restaurateurs around the country.

Consumers are becoming savvier about environmental practices thanks to efforts such as Seafood Watch, which promotes buying sustainable seafood and thus reducing stress on overfished species. The Monterey Bay Aquarium developed a pocket guide that lists endangered or poorly managed seafood. The guide, distributed free to all of 1.2 million visitors annually at the aquarium, recommends dining options that support environmentally friendly fisheries or aquaculture operations. More than 4.5 million cards have been distributed, and while the greatest effect is on the West Coast, these cards are slowly making their way to restaurants that serve seafood around the country. "Snapper was our biggest-selling item on the menu, but snapper is an overfished species, so the first thing we did was take it off the menu," Shake says. "It was a big leap for us."

The results were surprising. Not only was there no decrease in sales, but Shake estimates that in the three years since the restaurants have joined the Seafood Watch program, sales have increased by more than 10 percent. "We benefit from the fabulous marketing program at the aquarium, which links to our Web site from theirs, and from so many promotional programs they have in place," Shake says. "We display the Seafood Watch logo on all of our printed material and it gets a lot of attention."

Guests at the Shake family restaurants also receive a copy of the "Seafood Watch" pocket guide with their dinner check, reinforcing the company's commitment to sustainable seafood practices. Of course, adhering to the Seafood Watch guidelines requires educating employees about those guidelines so that staff can answer customer questions. That presented minimal problems for Shake. "Because of the area we are in, many of our employees are quite familiar with the fishing industry and are excited to do what they can to improve the industry," Shake says. "We cover guidelines in staff meetings and memos, and it has really become a positive for everyone involved."

In terms of publicity, offering sustainable seafood resulted in valuable publicity. Jeff Jake, executive chef at the Lodge of Pebble Beach, another neighbor of the Monterey Bay Aquarium, also put in place the Seafood Watch program. In May 2004, he received a call from a USA Today

reporter who was writing about growing consumer interest in sustainable seafood programs. The bold headline read: "Consumers go fishin' for an Earth-friendly catch; Restaurants, markets are hooked, too." The story ran 875 words in the Life section of USA Today, which has more than 5.2 million domestic readers.

"Anytime you get national exposure, it's a great thing," Jake says. "I have 56 people on my staff who received the recognition through me and they take a lot of pride in that they stand for something important, in addition to great food."

Such publicity and the participation in the Seafood Watch program allow Jake's staff an opportunity to explain to the high-end clients at the Lodge why the restaurant doesn't serve Chilean sea bass, Beluga caviar or swordfish and other menu items those clients may be accustomed to ordering.

An unexpected result of the publicity was an increased interest in the number and quality of people applying to work with Jake and his staff at Pebble Beach. "Overall, such publicity and such affiliation with a greater cause improves the image of the restaurant and draws quality people to you, whether they are potential employees or new clients," Jake says.

Greening Through Cleaning

When it comes to greening a restaurant, one fairly easy change to make is with the cleaning chemicals used in the facility. Finding environmentally preferable or green products used to be a tough call, but not today. Most of the major cleaning chemical manufacturers, several regional suppliers and many startup companies offer a complete line of effective and economically competitive green cleaning products. To assist its members in finding acceptable sources for green products, the Green Restaurant Association offers the booklet, "Guide to Endorsed Products."

One interesting product is an EPA-approved all-natural botanical disinfectant fungicide that is based on thymol (derived from thyme). The product is marketed under the trade name Benefect and is manufactured by Sensible Life Products in Ontario, Canada.

Green Seal Inc. in Washington, D.C., is a recognized leader in defining what green means when it comes to cleaning and other products. In 2000, Green Seal established minimum standards (GS-37) for restroom chemicals, glass and general-purpose cleaners. Since that time Green Seal has amended its carpet and institutional products standard and issued a technical report on green floor care.

Green Seal will be developing a green restaurant standard and is assembling financing to move forward with the project. Green Seal also recently announced that it will begin work on an environmental standard for the certification of Green Cleaning Services.

Promicrobials. One of the newer product categories on the market today incorporates the use of beneficial bacteria and enzymes -- promicrobials -- into the cleaning process. Specialized formulations are available for use as drain and grease trap cleaners, odor counteractants, carpet spotters and floor cleaning products. In drains and grease traps, premeasured packets or other manual delivery methods can be used, or automated injection systems may be set to periodically feed bacteria into the drain system. When cleaning hard surfaces the solution can be mopped or otherwise applied to floors or tile, manually scrubbed with a mop or brush, or machine-scrubbed using an auto scrubber.

Such biotech products are safe, environmentally preferable, cost-effective and provide long-term

solutions to common and difficult cleaning problems found in restaurants, kitchens and foodservice establishments.

"Modern-day bacteria-based cleaning products are septic-friendly intelligent systems that recognize specific types of organic matter and produce enzymes that degrade the organics so the bacteria can use it as a food source. Common uses in restaurants include cleaning and deodorizing kitchen floors, bathrooms, refuse storage areas, loading docks and dumpsters," says Lois Davis, global business manager for Novozymes Biologicals Inc. in Salem, Virginia:

"Unlike other detergent cleaners," Davis says, "Bacteria-based cleaners keep on cleaning whenever moisture is present. Spores remain in the pores and crevices of floors, in grout and where fixtures are attached, and keep on degrading or removing soils long after the cleaning crew has left. The floor surface gets cleaner with each application because more embedded grease is removed, which increases traction and eliminates odors."

Particularly Receptive Guests

"Our customers deserve fine dining as well as a look to the future of how food sources affect our environment," says Xanterra's Lu Harlow, director of food and beverage operations at Lake Yellowstone Hotel at Yellowstone National Park, now operated by Denver-based Xanterra Parks & Resorts.

Xanterra is adopting practices that range from using organic and sustainable foods to green building standards to aggressively using wind energy at a number of its properties. "We looked at ourselves as purveyors of services in our national parks and what we could be doing better as a corporate client of the environment," says Xanterra spokeswoman Mona Mesereau.

"Part of our commitment to sustainable cuisine is to educate our guests and employees about the reasons behind our decisions," says Chef Peter Pahk at Xanterra's Grill at Silverado in Napa Valley. "Balancing availability, food cost and guest preferences are always a challenge, but we have found that our guests are particularly receptive when we explain that the choices they make can directly affect the health of the planet."

-- Restaurant Startup & Growth

Informational Resources for Greening Your Startup

The Green Restaurant Association

Established in 1990, the Green Restaurant Association (GRA) is a nonprofit organization that provides a number of services to restaurants interested in going green. These services, some fee-based and some free of charge, range from consulting to marketing to identifying green vendors. The GRA has 115 member establishments in 20 states and expects to have 250 members by the beginning of 2006.

Membership includes mostly small mom and pop operations, but also some larger fine dining restaurants and chains, coffeehouses, and pizzerias. The association has assisted restaurant owners in "going green" for more than 15 years and claims to have the largest database of information in the world on green and sustainable restaurant operations.

The benefits of becoming certified by the GRA include cost savings, publicity and active

environmental stewardship. The association works to connect environmentally conscious customers with its member restaurants.

The GRA publishes a "Certified Green Restaurant Guide" in print and Web formats to make it easy for consumers to find certified restaurants in their local area. The GRA hosts events to gain media exposure for its members. In the past this has included having members featured on CNN, ABC and other networks as well as in local and national print media. The Green Restaurant Association has consultants available throughout the country to assist restaurant owners in going green in the areas of energy, water, food purchase, recycling, cleaning, paper, pest control, waste stream reduction and disposal.

"It's an exciting time for us," says Michael Oshman, president of GRA. "We have been growing slowly over the years, but now people and companies are starting to take active notice of the need to create an ecologically sustainable environment in the foodservice industry. It's taken time, but the GRA is now in a position to be of tremendous help to our members and the industry."

GRA certification costs begin at $700 and are based on annual income and other factors. To obtain certification an establishment must commit to putting in place 11 guidelines out of more than 100 (see "Eleven Guidelines for Greening Your Startup" below), make at least one change with their application and agree to make at least four changes per year thereafter. The association has a book, "Dining Green," that outlines the certification process. It can be purchased for $10 online at www.dinegreen.com or by calling (858) 452-7378.

GRA offers consulting service contracts from one to five years that range in cost, depending on the size of your restaurant, from $700 to $3,000. For that price, GRA employees will perform an environmental assessment of your property much in the same way an auditor would perform a financial assessment of your business. That assessment highlights what your operation is doing well, then plots four changes to be put in place within a year.

Simpler services offered by GRA include access to information and resources. The Dine Green Store www.dinegreenstore.com offers suggestions of distributors who carry environmentally friendly products for the restaurant industry, such as recycled paper products, bleach alternatives, energy-efficient light bulbs and water-saving devices.

"There are a number of misconceptions people come to us with about what is required to implement environmental practices, and our most important mission is to educate restaurateurs about the benefits, both financially and socially," Oshman says.

Those misconceptions include everything from increased costs in products and labor to overwhelming demands in training, storage and more. Not once has the GRA encountered a misconception that wasn't easily negated, he says.

"Maybe reducing paper waste is all you feel you can do at this point, and that's OK," Oshman says. "The bottom line is you can take big steps or small steps, and we'll work with you at your comfort level."

"We always go for the biggest financial and environmental impact in the first year," Oshman says, explaining that for some restaurants, while the first-year financial hit is significant, it can be followed by a sizable return on any investments, such as plumbing or lighting fixtures that reduce waste, which may add up to cutting costs by 50 percent or more in the first year. For others, the payback may simply be improved community image or the sense of doing "the right thing," he says.

Institute for EcoTourism

Another organization is the Institute for EcoTourism, in Sedona, Arizona.

In contrast to the GRA, IOET acts as a clearinghouse of information for which it charges no or minimal fees. The Web site www.ioet.org also provides information on multimedia presentations and other materials that may be distributed to restaurant managers and employees that highlight green standards that are quite simple to put in place. For example, thawing frozen meat and other products can be accomplished in manners other than placing them under running hot water for several hours.

Use live plants rather than plastic or silk plants to improve the air quality of your restaurant. Closing the freezer door or turning the lights off in the office can truly make a difference, and when employees are reminded of the benefit, perhaps they will make a greater effort to remember.

"Each property and each part of the country faces different environmental challenges, but the idea is to get people thinking creatively and responsibly," says Jonathan Duncan, executive director of the IOET.

Other Resources on the Web

www.greenhotels.com -- Information on applying green processes to the hospitality industry.

www.greenseal.org -- Information on Green Seal Certified Cleaning Product Standards and a report on Green Floor Care.

www.usgbc.org -- Information on the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification program.

www.carpet-rug.org -- Information on "Green" carpeting, and its "Green Label" testing program for vacuum cleaners and other equipment, as well as carpet-cleaning chemicals.

www.epa.gov -- Information on Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) and green issues.

www.westp2net.org -- An informational resource on pollution prevention and green cleaning issues.

Eleven Guidelines for Greening Your Startup

- **Energy efficiency and conservation.** When making new and replacement purchases specify equipment rated as energy-efficient. This includes lighting, heating, water heating, ventilation, air conditioning, foodservice appliances, office equipment and transportation.
- **Water efficiency and conservation.** Specify water-efficient appliances, repair leaks promptly, and practice conservation in irrigation.
- **Recycling and composting.** Recycle instead of dispose. Find local sources to recycle glass, plastic, metal, cardboard, mixed paper, and grease, oil, ink and toner cartridges. Participate in local reuse projects for unused items and materials instead of disposal. Food waste can be diverted from landfills and made into nutrient-rich soil through the use of

composting services or on-site systems.

- **Sustainable food.** Where possible use locally grown produce and sustainable food products. Locally grown foods -- all factors considered -- use fewer resources and create less pollution. Sustainable food products support long-term maintenance of ecosystems and agriculture for future generations. Organic agriculture prohibits the use of toxic synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, irradiation, sewage sludge and genetic engineering.
- **Pollution prevention.** Use source reduction, reuse, and improved and efficient operational practices in all aspects of your business. Replace polystyrene foam products with items made from biodegradable and less toxic alternatives such as plant-based plastics, and recycled and unbleached paper. Use reusable nondisposable washable items where possible.
- **Recycled, tree-free, biodegradable and organic products.** Use products made from or that contain a high percentage of materials collected from post-consumer or post-industrial waste sources. Use tree-free products made from alternative plant sources such as hemp, bamboo, coir and kenaf. Use biodegradable materials that can be decomposed by biological agents, especially bacteria. Use organic products that are grown without the use of toxic materials or processes.
- **Chlorine-free paper products.** Use chlorine-free paper products in the office, restroom and kitchen. Use launderable clothes where possible and practical.
- **Nontoxic cleaning and chemical products.** Use cleaning products that are Green Seal- and or GRA-certified. Use processes that capture and contain, but do not redistribute soils. Use products that are biodegradable, free of hazardous materials and safe for people, animals and the environment. Reduce the use and strength of cleaning product where possible. Use plant-based cleaning products were possible. Focus on prevention and maintenance instead of cleaning, restoration and replacement. Use equipment and processes that use water, heat, time and agitation in place of chemicals for cleaning. Establish preventive maintenance schedules that reduce the need for aggressive cleaning procedures or the use of harsh chemicals.
- **Green power.** Where possible develop and use power that is available from renewable resources such as wind, solar, geothermal, small hydro and biomass generation sources.
- **Green building and construction.** Use green building and construction practices and materials that will reduce or eliminate the negative effects of buildings on the environment, occupants and the local community.
- **Employee education.** Provide ongoing training and support to staff, emphasizing the environmental effect of the restaurant industry and a path toward ecological sustainability.

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