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Ten Ways to Go Green and Reduce Your Utility Costs

by Patricia Luebke

It's impossible to pick up any magazine or newspaper without reading about businesses going green. "Green" has come to mean a business practice that is compatible with the environment. Your restaurant might already be a model of environmental best practices, or you may think that "green" restaurants are for tree huggers dishing out only granola, tofu and organic juices.

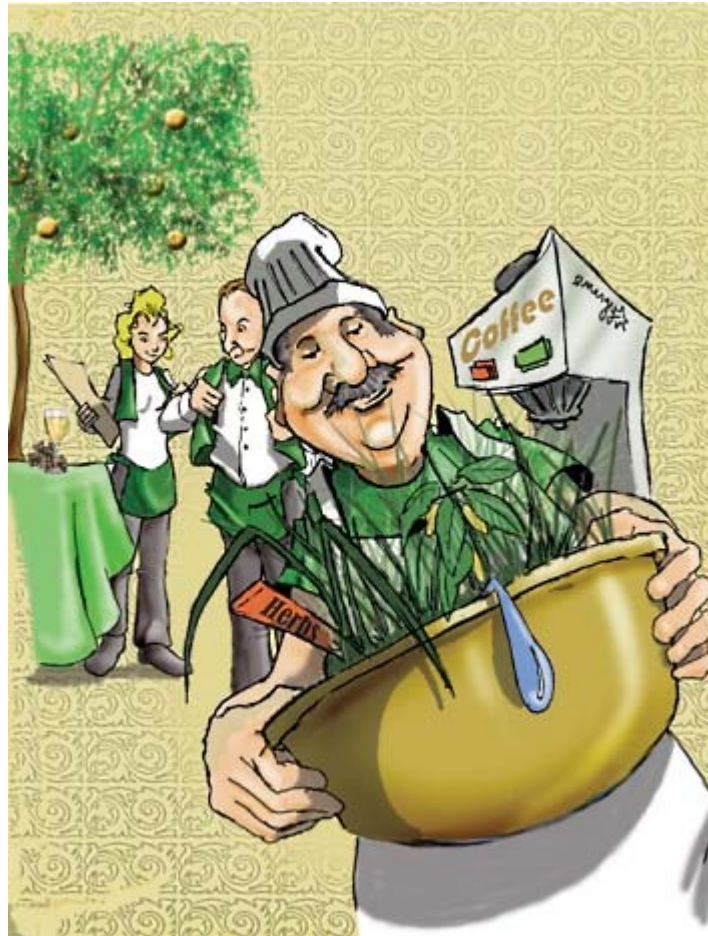
What you may not have realized is that quite often green practices offer more than an opportunity to be kind to Mother Earth. Green practices can actually save you money and resources. The best news is that you don't have to "go green" all at once. You don't have to rip out your steam heat and install solar panels. In fact, in many cases, you don't have to spend one thin dime to change the way you do something to become more environmentally friendly. So here are 10 ways to go green that you can put into effect today that real restaurants are actually doing now.

Bear in mind that "going green" has a cumulative effect. None of these practices alone will instantly transform your restaurant, but each one will help develop a new sense of thinking about the resources you use, how your actions affect the rest of the planet and how you might use your resources in a different way. Some of these ideas are simply baby steps to get you on your way.

1. Remember your dad's rant. Long before anyone had heard the term "go green," dads everywhere were ranting about turning off lights that were not in use. "Every light in this house is on!" these dads would yell, but, in this case, Father did know best. Is every light and every appliance in your restaurant turned on all the time?

Turning off lights and equipment when not in use remains one of the easiest and most effective ways to save energy, and cash. Some appliances that are simply plugged in, even if they are not turned on or in use, may be using electricity. So turn off, unplug and look for the results in your electric bill. One expert suggests that eliminating just one hour of broiler idle per day could save you \$200 a year.

Chef Matt Bolus of Red Sky in Charleston, South Carolina, learned that if he turned off his espresso machine overnight, he could save up to \$10 a month. OK, that may not sound like



much, but that's \$10 a month for flipping one switch. What other machines can be turned off or unplugged when not in use?

2. About those light bulbs. Yes, it's true that compact fluorescent bulbs use about 75 percent less energy than traditional light bulbs. They are more expensive going in, but you will appreciate the energy savings and the lifespan of compact fluorescents, which can be up to 10 times the life of a regular bulb. Some municipalities will even help you with the initial investment for these bulbs so check around for any programs in place in your area before you buy.

You might also consider installing an "occupancy sensor," which will turn off lights automatically when a room is empty. A variety of these sensors are available, depending on the size of the room and other details. However, you could easily purchase one for under \$50.

Consider, for example, your walk-in refrigerator. Does it need to have a light constantly running? People walk in and out all day, but no doubt only shut off the light when they leave at night. You may want to have it as your policy that the default position of the light in the walk-in is "off" and have people turn the light on only as needed.

'One last idea about light bulbs: Keep them clean. When's the last time you cleaned your light bulbs? "Dusty light bulbs reduce light output, which can make it seem as though they need to be replaced," says Tom Debin, CEO of the energy management company Equity through Energy. "Cleaning light bulbs every six to 12 months can minimize dust, grease and smoke and prolong their usability."

And cleanliness is important on other equipment. "Carbon and grease buildup on cooking equipment cause them to use more energy to work properly," Debin says. That goes especially for radiator vents on refrigerators that will run much more efficiently if cleaned regularly.

3. Plant an herb garden. How much more "locally grown" can you get than your own backyard? Years ago, people had "kitchen gardens" right outside the back door of their homes. Of course, if your restaurant is in a mall, an herb garden may not be possible. But, for some restaurants, such as Parrish Food & Goods in Atlanta's Inman Park, an herb garden serves Chef Tim Magee's culinary needs. Chef Magee grows chives, thyme, basil, mint and rosemary. He uses all the herbs for the restaurant. Rosemary, for example, is used in the barbecue shrimp, alongside the catfish and as a cure on the duck legs. Parish also captures its rainwater through an umbrella pole. This rainwater is reused to water plants and the herb garden.

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But don't think an herb garden is something limited to a boutique restaurant. Aurora Health Care is the second-largest private employer in Wisconsin and two of its facilities, Aurora West Allis Medical Center and Aurora St. Luke's Medical Center, both have herb gardens, with the herbs used to create meals served at the hospitals. Composting allows recycled garden waste to be put back into the soil, and scrap produce discarded from kitchens makes a natural compost material for these gardens.

4. Buy Energy Star™ appliances. When replacing equipment and appliances, look for the Energy Star tags. The Energy Star program has many useful resources for restaurant owners outlined at www.energystar.gov. Energy Star appliances can save 10 percent to 30 percent in utility bills over the course of a year, without sacrificing quality. In fact, in some municipalities, you may even be given a rebate - hard cash - for purchasing an Energy Star appliance. To see if your restaurant qualifies for a rebate, enter your ZIP code at www.energystar.gov/CFSrebate locator. Energy Star also provides a downloadable "Energy Star Restaurant Guidebook" at its site

to get you started on all the benefits of Energy Star appliances and equipment.

5. Go green while marketing your restaurant. You can simultaneously do something good for the environment while doing something good for the health of your restaurant. Take the example of The Roosevelt Grille and the Sawtooth Club, both in the Sun Valley/Ketchum, Idaho, area. Rather than using disposable containers for outgoing orders or for doggie bags, these two restaurants purchased Tupperware containers and ask the customer to return the containers to the restaurant.

These returnable containers were given at first just to local residents; wait staff asked customers if they lived in the area or would be in town for a few days. But there is something in it for the customer, too, other than the knowledge that their takeout containers are not contributing to the landfill. Customers who return the containers receive a 10 percent discount off their next meal. "This has proved to be very successful and saved on costs by eliminating the majority of throw-away to-go boxes," says Bronwyn Patterson of the Roosevelt Grille.

6. Stop printing daily menus. At Mado, in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood, the menus are written on recycled chalkboards. At Parrish in Atlanta, servers recite each day's menu verbally as a way to cut down on paper via regular menu printings. When paper is necessary, Parrish uses recycled paper, from its stationery to coffee sleeves.

The cost of ink and paper and computer time can add up quickly. Instead, offer printed menus for items that won't change as frequently and write specials on a blackboard or have servers recite them. Quite often, businesses have to confront their own sacred cows, "But we have to have daily menus." Why? Sometimes the "have to haves" are just ingrained routines that can be changed. And your customers will appreciate the fact that you are trying to do your share for the environment by saving a few trees.

7. Establish a green cleaning operation. According to Mike Cereghino of EcoLogic Solutions, the average custodian uses traditional cleaning chemicals that produce nearly 60 pounds of hazardous waste per year. "Over half of traditional cleaning chemicals contain ingredients that can blind the unprotected user, cause severe skin damage and scars, interfere with human and animal hormone systems, and damage the blood, liver kidney and nervous system," Cereghino says.

He says that degreasers are among the most hazardous cleaning products available. "Pot and pan soap flows down the drain constantly," Cereghino says. "The glass cleaner used for the windows, the wood polish used for the bar and the all-purpose cleaners used on tables is being inhaled all day long by customers and those who work there. These are hazardous chemicals that have an instant effect on the environment."

His advice? Restaurant owners should look for an environmental company that has green cleaning products for the foodservice industry. He stresses that, unlike the shelves of your local grocery store, green products available commercially are cost-competitive with traditional products. "You want to look for 100 percent nonhazardous products. Why get a product that is kinda green?" he says.

8. Hold the ketchup. It's not unusual for a busy counter person to grab a handful of ketchup packets, a handful of salt and peppers, and a dozen napkins all for one lone takeout burger. How many ketchup packets does one burger need? Offices nationwide have drawers stuffed with various condiment packets that sit there collecting dust until they are eventually tossed. What's your restaurant's policy? How precise are you when dispensing condiments and other takeout utensils?

This may not seem like an ecological issue, but think about it. Resources are expended to create condiment packets and your money is used to pay for them, many of which end up in a trash basket. Doesn't make sense. And it's not just the condiments. Add in napkins, extra paper plates, plastic cutlery and other items and you have what just may be a total waste of your money supplying customers with something they don't need.

Delivery.com, a leading online service offering local delivery of food, flowers, groceries and other items, announced it is helping customers and merchants reduce waste in an effort to be more environmentally responsible. "Restaurants include an abundance of condiments, paper products and plastic cutlery with nearly every order, much of which is rarely used and therefore discarded," says Paul Geller, CEO of Delivery.com. "Restaurants have to buy and stock these items but they're often tossed out immediately or put in a drawer to be thrown out later. In response to comments from customers, who have said they don't need any more packets of ketchup or plastic ware, we are adding an 'opt-out' button so customers can choose whether they require such condiments or utensils," Geller says.

9. Analyze your trash. As the saying goes, one man's trash is another man's treasure. Some of your garbage could be used as compost, and you may be able to find a local partner, such as a community garden or a school with a greenhouse, to share your compostable waste. (By the way, this effort would be very newsworthy to your local media.)

At North Country Brewing Company in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, owner Bob McCafferty composts everything but meat scraps. All prep waste is placed in a worm bin. As the worms eat, their droppings then turn into high-nitrogen fertilizer that he uses on the restaurant's garden - he grows his own vegetables for the restaurant. As a result of the worm bin, McCafferty has been able to reduce his restaurant's waste from 24 cubic yards of landfill waste to 12 cubic yards. He is in the process of acquiring pigs to eat the meat scraps, which will further reduce the waste to just six cubic yards.

If you're not quite at the worm bin and pigs level, you can still find more earth-friendly ways to deal with your trash. At Trattoria Lucca in Charleston, South Carolina, the environmentally conscious staff played a huge role in putting in place a modern-day, eco-friendly trash system involving various recycling bins. Chef Ken Vedrinski says, "We have found that it doesn't cost any money to be a little more responsible."

10. Got your attention? Start with an energy audit. Do you study your electric bill? That's the first step of an energy audit - knowing exactly how much energy you are using and how that energy use changes (or doesn't) during the year and from year to year. You've got to become an expert on your own use, and understanding every line of your energy bills is crucial.

Next you will want to have a formal energy audit performed on your restaurant. These audits are sometimes free of charge from your local utility company, or you can hire an outside energy efficient expert or consultant. Typically an energy audit takes just one on-site visit. The individual who conducts your audit may also be able to tell you how much restaurants similar to yours are spending on energy so you can see how you compare.

The audit will reveal how much heat (or cool) is escaping due to faulty construction, old windows or poor insulation. All your machinery and equipment, from your computers to your broilers, will be analyzed for their energy use and potential savings. The individual conducting the audit will give you a list of suggestions on how you can do better. These may range from correcting bad habits (leaving lights on all the time) to buying insulation blankets for water pipes. The energy audit is a great starting point for turning your restaurant greener, while showing you ways to save money.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

That's the mantra of the green movement. When you think about recycling, consider the example of Chicago's Mado. Their chef/owners Rob and Alice Levitt are always looking for ways to reduce their waste. For example, they "recycle" bread into breadcrumbs to add to dishes and use for toppings. What other ways can you find at your restaurant to discover second uses for product that might be otherwise tossed in the garbage?

Rome wasn't built in a day, and your restaurant is not going to go green overnight. That's why it's important to get all your staff on the same page so that your green efforts are team-wide. "Significant energy savings come from all levels, and most people are open to doing something good for the environment," Tom Debin of Equity through Energy says. "Let employees know about your commitment to energy efficiency and educate them on easy ways that they can help. Creating a culture of awareness is one of the best ways to start good habits and start saving."

As with everything else in a well-managed restaurant, going green involves educating your staff and having them buy into your efforts and share your enthusiasm. The ideas here are ways to get you started. Even if you don't think of yourself as an eco-activist, you can approach going green in a totally selfish manner. You can save money and add cash to your bottom line with the byproduct being that you are doing good and being a responsible corporate citizen.

-- [Restaurant Startup & Growth](#)

Creating a 'Green Restaurant'

In the green arena, startup restaurants are in a unique position. They have the opportunity from Day One to incorporate environmentally sustainable practices into the day-to-day operation of their restaurant. Not only can they train their staff to be green-minded starting on opening day, they can literally build and construct the restaurant with a green foundation. The building blocks necessary to create a green restaurant from scratch include recycled or reused building materials, nontoxic paint and chemicals, energy-efficient equipment, recycled packaging (like to-go boxes) and sustainable food sources.

There are hundreds of things a restaurant can do to reduce its negative environmental imprint. Simply sit down at your restaurant from the perspective of a guest, and look at your plate to see all the possible changes. From sustainable meat, to where the leftovers go, what kind of chemicals clean the plate, how energy efficient is the dishwasher that will clean it, the wood upon which your feet rest on the floor, and the table where your plate sits. Where are these materials sourced?

Let's look at food first. Many customers are demanding pesticide-free fruits and vegetables, and prefer local food sources because they are concerned about the climate change effect of delivering food long distances. Prioritizing food purchasing is a huge part of a restaurant owner's job. For example, customers want fish that is not laden with mercury and PCB's, due to other industrial processes polluting the water in which it swims. Also, customers are considering if the fish is part of a species that is on the brink of extinction in the next five years, or is it a fish that has a healthy and abundant supply and is caught using sustainable methods.

Thinking about where food is sourced can seem overwhelming. The Green Restaurant Association, a national nonprofit organization, has been helping restaurants clear the fog around confusing issues like these since 1990. On December 1, 2008, the GRA launched its new

standards called Green Restaurant™ 4.0. As part of those standards, the GRA upgraded how it works with restaurant startups through its Certified Green Restaurant SustainaBuild™ program. The GRA provides concise, environmentally accurate information and also provides specifics to help restaurants get the most sustainable products available to them in their area.

In creating a Green Restaurant™, there are many questions to consider, such as Where does food waste go? Is it thrown in the trash or composted? Recently, a Certified Green Restaurant™ in Texas reported cutting its waste by 98 percent due to its full-scale recycling and composting system. No waste equals no trash hauling fee, and no harmful effect on area landfills. Recycling and composting allow for a cyclical system in which glass, aluminum, plastic, and food leftovers get remade into new glass, new plastic and new soil that grows new food.

What about flooring, tables and décor materials? Wood floors and furniture can come from rain forests or other clear-cut ecosystems. But it can be made from recycled material, salvaged wood and bamboo, all of which are readily available and far less detrimental to the restaurant's environmental imprint.

Particularly in the current state of the U.S. economy, startup restaurants need to do something different, unique, responsible and noteworthy to set themselves apart. Restaurant owners are deciding if they want to join the evolving green economy, in which decisions are made not only for the next month, but also for the next year and the next generation. Businesses that choose to build their ventures with sustainable methods and practices in mind protect employees from harmful chemicals, eliminate waste from their community and provide new resources for them to use instead.

"Going green" is a process that takes a little bit more effort; however, it is a process. You don't have to change everything at once. Even small "baby step" changes are important. But, it's a wise choice for a restaurant that plans to be around for many years because the greening process itself is likely going to lower the operational costs by having lower electricity bills, lower natural gas bills, lower garbage bills, better employee morale, better consumer loyalty and the type of publicity and media exposure that is unprecedented outside of restaurants that are doing something in a sustainable way.

Additional Resources

The National Restaurant Association (NRA) has a Web site at

www.conserve.restaurant.org . According to the NRA, this site is the flagship of the National Restaurant Association's Conserve: Solutions for Sustainability initiative, which aims to help restaurants of all sizes go green without hurting their bottom lines. The site includes tips and success stories of restaurants that have put in place a variety of green practices, most at little or no cost. The site has sections on energy, water, construction and waste reduction and new content is added continually.

The Green Restaurant Association is a national, nonprofit organization that provides services in research, consulting education, marketing and community organizing. The Green Restaurant Association believes in a collaborative approach that involves the restaurant along with its vendors, manufacturers, local governments, customers, media and others. Learn more about its efforts www.dinegreen.com. Take a risk. Try the "Restaurateur Quiz" to see just how environmentally responsible your restaurant is now. Then discover ways you can do better.

Visit www.ecopreneurist.com, click on "Business & Technology" and then do a search for "restaurant." You'll find dozens of articles for restaurant owners on everything from vegetarian menu items to sustainable seafood, biofuels and green cleaning supplies.

101 Ways to Turn Your Business Green is an easy-to-read book with realistic suggestions on how to be more environmentally aware while also conserving funds. Although not written for restaurants, this book will give you many ideas to expand on your greening efforts. Written by Rich Mintzer, this book is published by Entrepreneur Press and is available at a discount at Amazon.com.

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