

# SUSTAINABILITY: FOOD FOR THOUGHT

## Saving the World and Making More Money One Straw At A Time

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### OVERVIEW

In the last several years, many of the articles, lectures, training and news about the food service industry have been negative. This training will NOT have any discussion of labor shortages, rent increases, COVID issues, inflation, product shortages, supply chain issues, etc. These articles will only be discussing positive issues that include:

- increasing profit for your business by:
  - ◊ decreasing expenses
  - ◊ increasing price points
  - ◊ marketing both as an asset
- working towards global sustainability, helping reverse climate change and having numerous other positive environmentally effects.

If the above sounds like a win-win-win for your business, your business' guests and for the environment, then keep reading! And remember, there is no downside, this is all positive.

### A PENNY SAVED IS A PENNY EARNED

In the 1750s, Benjamin Franklin said the well-known phrase: "A penny saved is a penny earned."

Over 275 years later, this phrase is still applicable. It is important to keep in mind that everything you buy, use, give to guests, etc. in your business has a common denominator: Something Not Thrown Out is A Penny Saved and Part of the Environment Saved.

### SAVING THE WORLD AND MONEY ONE STRAW AT A TIME

Most chefs and restaurant managers, operators and owners remember when it became known that plastic straws were getting into the world's oceans and being found in marine life, particularly turtles. There was a major public shift by guests to decline the use of straws. However, the food service industry continued to hand out straws like mad—even to people who didn't want them! And once the straws hit the table, they couldn't be served at other tables in many jurisdictions so they would just be thrown away.

Whether or not the straws made it into the ocean is a moot issue. The straws had to end up somewhere. And of course, anything that was never used that goes into the dumpster is just money being thrown out. By the way, if you are in a jurisdiction that requires straws only be given out upon request, make sure your servers are trained on that issue and are following it.

Authors' note: Just a few months before this training was written, one of the authors was in a small pizzeria chain in the Boston area. The server brought four waters and put them down on the



table with four straws. We said we didn't want straws and she shrugged. We ordered a bottle of wine and one of the guests ordered a soda. The server brought the wine, the soda and four straws "In case anyone wanted to try the soda." When the water glasses were refilled four more straws went on the table. Twelve straws were on the table when we left—and remember, we wanted none. This might seem like an insignificant waste of money, but if you multiply it by the tables in the restaurant, times the number of turns of the tables, times the number of days the restaurant is open per year, times the number of units in the chain you have a substantial amount of money being literally and figuratively thrown away

## **DON'T GIVE AWAY PRODUCT UNLESS THE CUSTOMER WANTS IT!**

If you went into a barbecue restaurant after work and ordered a ½ rack of ribs, beans, coleslaw and a corn muffin, when you got home you would expect to see these items. You wouldn't expect to see that you were given at no extra charge a piece of chicken and a side of macaroni and cheese. You would be surprised that you were given items that you didn't order and didn't pay for. You would wonder how much money the business was losing giving out freebies.

Now, suppose you went into the barbecue restaurant after work and ordered a ½ rack of ribs, beans, coleslaw and a muffin, and when you got home, you found in your bag in addition to the food, a few plastic souffle cups with lids of barbecue sauce, a plastic bib, a large wad of napkins, plastic cutlery in a plastic bag, and packages of salt and pepper. You didn't want or need any of these items. Unfortunately, with the materials used, none of these items except the napkins are recyclable in your community meaning you throw out a lot of plastic which the owner of the business paid for. The restaurant polluted and spent money they didn't need to. Or, in reverse, the restaurant lost profit and made you into a reluctant accomplice in throwing away plastic.

Now imagine this same thing happened to an environmentally conscious customer. The customer doesn't really think about the money wasted; the customer thinks that as a result of the many wasteful items in the bag, they decide not to order from that restaurant again and to tell their friends how wasteful the restaurant was. They take it one step further and post comments on online food restaurant review sites.

The waste of money, pollution, unhappy customers and bad reviews could have been easily prevented if

the customer was asked: "Would you like extra sauce, a bib, napkins, salt and pepper, or utensils?" Many businesses will say that they don't have the time to ask this for each guest. However, asking the question saves money which goes right to the bottom line of profitability.

Side Bar: A very popular food blogger posted a blog complaining about the excessive packaging of a taqueria he went to. They ordered a burrito and watched the burrito being put in foil, then placed on a paper plate which was folded around it, then into a brown bag, then into a plastic bag. They got outside the restaurant and found that there were packages of hot sauce, ketchup (yes, the blogger wondered why there was ketchup with his burrito), packets of salt and pepper, and a plastic wrapped fork and a separate plastic wrapped knife. They sighed as they regretfully threw it all away and ate the burrito with their hands. A large waste of money to the owners of the taqueria, and as the blogger noted, a lot of unnecessary addition to the landfill.

## **STOP SERVING WATER UNLESS REQUESTED—BREAD AND ROLLS, SOUP CRACKERS, ETC.**

In 2016, California forbade restaurants to serve water to guests unless requested. The theory was that A LOT of water was wasted being poured for guests who didn't want it. Restaurants at first were very much against the idea. However, the cost savings started adding up:



less labor to pour water to everyone, less bussing time per table, less glasses to dish wash, LESS WATER to wash the glasses, and less chemicals purchased for the dishwasher. Not serving tap water prevented a water—and money—from going down the drain. In fact, it is quite possible this

led to more money being made by food service businesses because of guests switching to other beverages or bottled water.

Automatically passing out items at your establishments should be reviewed. Do you put out bread and butter, chips and salsa, etc. on the tables automatically? What about crackers with your soup? It would be a sound business practice to examine each bus tub during a busy service

to see how much is coming back into the kitchen of these and other items. Your goal is to save money and save the planet.

## DON'T GET BOGGED DOWN WITH BAGS!

The issue of bags, plastic or otherwise, has become a key trigger for many guests. The use of non-reusable and non-recyclable plastic bags has become a particularly major issue. Again, this is another one of those items that the food service industry just gives away, costing money and directly contributing to a major pollution problem.



For example, when a customer asks for a to-go box to package up food they want to take home from their dinner, do you then—without asking—put the container in a plastic bag? Are you like the burger places that wrap the burger, has the French fries in a bag, put both in a paper bag and then puts

the paper bag in a box or plastic bag? If your guest is standing holding their own reusable bags, do you still use yours or do you ask what the guest prefers? If your guest says “I don’t need a bag,” does your establishment use a plastic bag automatically out of routine?

Let’s look at this another way, if the guest orders a hamburger and says no onions, no pickles then you honor the guest’s request. That’s what hospitality is all about, listening to the guest and accommodating what the guest wants. Remember, hospitality and great service involves the entire customer experience, not just the preparation and plating of the food. And yes, this includes plastic bags.

## MARKET YOUR ENVIRONMENTAL EFFORTS

It’s been about 20 years since hotels started asking guests to reuse towels and to not have their linens changed daily. The hotel industry found that those small changes helped save money in water, energy, and labor. It also helped the environment by putting substantially less chemicals down the drain, as well as saving considerable amounts of water and energy needed to heat the water and run the washers and dryers.

What was also discovered was that the more saving the environment was discussed in the placards placed in the room, the more likely a guest was to reuse towels and not want linens washed every day. In other words, to the guests, the hotel being envi-

ronmentally friendly was so important to them that they were willing to forgo part of the benefits of being guests in a hotel—benefits that the guest was paying for—to help the environment! The guests, to help the environment, were contributing to the hotel seriously cutting back on expenses!

What this means to you as a member of the food service industry is that many (if not most of your guests) are interested in environmental issues and your business’ part in helping the environment. Market these issues with such things as “We’re saving as much water as we can for our community. Water will be served upon request.” Or maybe: “We use compostable straws and utensils. They cost us more, but we are trying to do our part to make the world better.” “Please let us know if you need condiments or plasticware with your TO GO order. We are cutting back on landfill in our community by only serving these items upon request.”



The bottom line is that being more sustainability conscious and more environmentally friendly has key positive notes for your guests and for your reviews. It can also save you money, which is, of course, money earned. Think about it this way: without selling any more products, your business will increase its profit (by decreasing expenses) while making the guests happier, and more likely to write great reviews and come back.

## NEXT MONTH

In the next lesson, we will show you how to get people to volunteer for free to help you with being more environmentally friendly, decrease your expenses, and increase your sales. And we will talk about why some people may be willing to give you money (and/or tax incentives) to modernize parts of your business.

