We all know that “going green” is good for the planet and good for business. Meet Denny’s operator Joey Terrell. He recently opened Denny’s first green restaurant and is going through the process to become LEED certified at the gold level. He says his costs for building the store were surprisingly equal to traditional construction, but here’s something that’s not equal—he’s saving $20,000 a year in utilities as compared with other equal-sized units. In our recent conversation, I found out that whether you’re thinking about new construction or retrofitting, Joey Terrell has some great tips that can make a big difference.
CK: Joey, let’s jump right into the heart of things. So many of us got into sustainability gradually even before green was mainstream. How did you decide to start down the sustainability path?

JT: It was the result of a fortunate accident. About 10 years ago, someone gave me a compact fluorescent light (CFL) that I carried around in my truck for about three months. I was sitting in my restaurant in Mokena, Ill., and a light bulb burned out over my head. I thought, “This might be a good time to use the CFL,” so I went out to my truck and got it.

A friend of mine was there with a camera and I asked him to use his light meter to see if there was any difference in the amount of light produced by the new CFL and the 100-watt bulb in the fixture next to it. Turns out, the 13-watt CFL gave off 20 percent more light than the 100-watt bulb it replaced. I did the math and realized that if I changed out the 100 lights in my restaurant, I’d save $440 a month in my electric bill. It took me about $3,500 to make the change, but I got my investment back quickly and have been reaping the benefits ever since.

That got me thinking—what other low-hanging fruit could I pick to save money? Leaky faucets—I could fix that. Then there are aerators; they’d been on all of the faucets originally, but over ten years, they’d all disappeared. Cooks would remove them so they could fill pots faster, customers would take them off the bathroom sinks and, over the years, they just all disappeared. I solved the problem by installing tamper-proof aerators that can’t be removed. It reduces the water flow tremendously. In the Joliet, Ill., store, we did a lot of things, such as installing low-flow faucets and toilets and a low-flow pressure valve for pre-washing dishes. We also have a dishwasher that uses the water from the last rinse on one cycle for the first wash cycle on the next load. Simple things like that have saved us 30 percent or more on water/sewer usage in the Joliet store.

CK: So you looked at it from a financial point first, right? You said, “It’s really about saving money,” and it so struck me because, while many people talk about sustainability with the overtone of how important it is to save the planet, at the end of the day, it’s so critical that we also run our business so that it’s sustainable.
JT: Yes, and that first financial decision led to everything else and ultimately to building the Joliet store. There were a lot of things we, the landlord, and our suppliers, did, and it was amazing. It was a financial decision, but now I realize that God works in mysterious ways and maybe he put me in the right place at the right time with that first burned-out bulb. That’s where it all started.

CK: So the Joliet store is the one that you’ve completely built, correct? And just to clarify, are you LEED-certified?
JT: That’s right, and yes, we’re in the process of becoming LEED-certified; our goal is “gold,” the second-highest level. We would liked to have gone for “platinum,” but we don’t own the building. Using one of the lowest numbers, the U.S. Green Building Council says that kitchens use 285 percent more utilities than the average of any other kind of commercial buildings, so that means the opportunities to conserve in the restaurant business are enormous. We’ve found that comparing the Joliet store with stores of similar size, we’re saving about $20,000 a year.

CK: It’s interesting that you see it like that; I love the way you phrase it, that you have so many opportunities for savings.
JT: One thing I recognized recently, is that when you ask restaurateurs how much water their restaurants use, they don’t know. I do! The average Denny’s uses one million gallons a year. With the equipment in Joliet, we calculated we would be able to reduce our water use by 30 percent to only 700,000 gallons. The city of Joliet learned that and reduced our hook-up fees by $25,000. Hey, that’s nice—I’ll take that!

CK: Often when talking about sustainability, we refer to the fact that this is truly not one individual’s initiative, but rather the combined efforts of many. When you were talking about your new building, you mentioned a number of different suppliers and the city. It sounds a lot like an old-fashioned, community barn raising.
JT: That’s a good description. Whenever I talked to people and showed them what I wanted to do, I got a lot of participation, from suppliers to the city. When I built the Joliet store, I was looking at two other locations. However, when Joliet offered me the $25,000 fee reduction, that was a steal, and no one else was doing anything like that. I hope they’re pursuing fee reductions because it presents a great opportunity for the city to invite restaurants and other businesses to be green.

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—Joey Terrell
CK: What a great story that is, and maybe the lesson to be learned here for municipalities is that supporting businesses that are pursuing conservation is good business practice. Let’s talk a little about retrofitting, since most people won’t be able to start from scratch, and many people run restaurants that are functioning day in and day out. What’s your advice for someone thinking about doing a retrofit?

JT: Look at the really easy stuff you can do:
1. Change out your lights with CFLs or LEDs (light-emitting diodes), which are even nicer. I have a friend with a 10,000 square-foot restaurant, and he saved $3,000 a month by replacing his 150-watt light bulbs with equivalent CFLs. It only took him three months to recover the cost.
2. Reduce your water usage. Install tamper-proof aerators on faucets and low-flow pre-rinse spray valves. Install an instant hot-water system; some people say they don’t work, but that’s because they don’t add a recirculator to send the cooled water back into the tank. In most restaurants, you have a 100-gallon water heater being maintained between 130 and 140 degrees 24 hours a day. With the instant hot-water system, there are only 17 gallons of water in the tank at any one time. In Mokena, we have three and they each take up less room than a desktop computer. They cost about $15,000 to install, but they reduce gas and water tremendously.
3. Here’s a real simple one—when you replace your roof, paint it white with a plasticizer like Duralast. In one experiment, two cars were placed in the Mojave Desert where the temperature was 80 degrees. The temperature inside the white car was 80 degrees, while the internal temperature in the black car was 126 degrees. That’s exactly what’s happening to the temperature on your roof. Think of how much less it will cost to cool that intake air when you only have to drop the temperature by eight degrees instead of 54 to reach an ideal 72 degrees.
4. We also put skylights in our restaurant that are built by the Amish in Arthur, Ill. Each skylight has four 4-foot x 9-foot mirrors that multiply the impact of the sun as it comes in. It feels like you’re eating in a meadow. I even put skylights in the back of the house because I want my employees to get the benefits of natural light, too.

CK: Are those skylights in your Mokena restaurant or the new building in Joliet?
JT: Those are in Joliet, but we’re getting ready to do a complete renovation on the Mokena store right now so it can also be a green restaurant. Actually, I think it qualifies right now, but we want to take it to the level we’re at in Joliet.

CK: Imagine I’m a restaurant operator and I really want to build a green restaurant, what would be your first piece of advice?
JT: Learn all you can about it yourself. My wife and I joined the U.S. Green Building Council. Make
sure your architect knows about building green restaurants. The architect needs to be experienced in green building, but they also need to understand the unique needs of building a restaurant. And feel free to come visit my restaurant if you’re in the area. We give tours and are happy to share our knowledge.

At this point, I think our employees know almost as much about it as I do. The other day, we had some Denny’s folks in for a routine inspection and I overheard the busboy talking to customers about the skylights. They’ve heard me give the tours and they see these things every day so they’re proud to say, “I know about that.” It makes me feel so happy to see them explaining it and taking ownership. Whether it’s fellow restaurant operators, employees or customers, it’s all about education.

CK: You have a Denny’s franchise. As we talk to operators in other facets of the foodservice industry, based on your experience, do you think what you’ve learned is applicable to quick-service or fine-dining restaurants?

JT: Absolutely, regardless of the segment, you can always save money.

About Joey Terrell
Joey grew up in the restaurant business, and although he went to college and became an accountant, the business was in his blood. One of Denny’s original franchisees, he owns restaurants in Joliet and Mokena, Ill.

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