Bright Ideas

Sustainability Tips From Industry Experts
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Greetings:

For restaurateurs, implementing sustainable best practices into their operations is more popular than ever before.

We at the National Restaurant Association want to make that implementation as successful and cost effective as possible. To that end, we have created this guide featuring tips and real world advice from industry experts appearing at the 2013 National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show in Chicago.

The information was compiled from our seven environmentally-focused education programs at the Show and includes input from the Clinton Global Initiative, Starbucks, Chipotle, and renowned chef Rick Bayless, among others!

Please take these excellent insights and consider them for your business strategy. You will save money, improve the environment and respond to your employees’ and customers’ interests.

To continue your sustainable business journey, sign up for our Conserve Sustainability Education Program for free. By doing so, you’ll learn more practical steps and good practices and even track your progress, too.

Visit www.restaurant.org/conserve and join today.

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The celebrated owner-operator of such Chicago stalwarts as Frontera Grill, Topolobampo and Xoco Mexican restaurants, recounted how the origins of food became important to his success as a restaurateur.

“When I started back in 1987, I had just moved here from living in Mexico … and we had just opened Frontera [Grill] in Chicago,” he said.

“We didn’t use the word sustainability at all back then, but something was amiss to me because almost all of the top chefs here were not relating anything they did to the local community. They were saying they got their ingredients from far-flung places and that your experience at their restaurants was going to be a rarified one because they had gone to such extremes to get those things. In Mexico, it was completely the opposite. They talked about how food related directly to the people in the towns and what dishes had developed there from that food.”

At the NRA Show education session on sustainability and the food chain, Bayless said growing up around his father’s barbecue restaurant in Oklahoma City and his time in Mexico, formed the foundation of his own cooking style, which was immersed in local flavors and foods that he could not find in Chicago in the 1980s.

“I grew up [around] a barbecue restaurant in Oklahoma City that was all about local flavor and local ingredients,” he said. “When I was a kid, I’d go to the commercial market, but it was really a very large farmers’ market. But here, I couldn’t find anything local. Over the next five years, I began to understand there were things people could grow for us and we could begin to develop some kind of Chicago flavor. But it was going to be an uphill battle.”

Over the years, he said, working with small, local farmers and producers led him to discover that they didn’t have enough resources to produce the amount of food he needed to supply his restaurants. But he realized there was something he could do about it.

“Eventually, a fellow came to us with this amazing spinach,” he recalled. “It happened to be Feb. 15, and he had this spinach in Chicago. Those of you who have spent any time in Chicago, in the winter, know this is not the time to expect any kind of spinach. He discovered a type he could grow in an unheated hoop greenhouse and he was going to grow this stuff if we wanted it. I said not only did we want it, but we wanted as much of it as he could get us. Suddenly I had this unique flavor. It was sweeter than normal spinach and it was a flavor I associate with here.”

But Bayless said the fellow said he couldn’t grow much of the spinach because he didn’t have enough money to build another hoop greenhouse. Bayless said “We decided to invest in it for him and he paid us back in spinach the next year.”

For Bayless, that was the beginning of creating a community.

“That developed into a no-interest loan program we ran for a few years where we had a few thousand dollars our farmers could borrow and they could pay us back in product in a year if it was something that we needed,” he said. “We eventually turned it into the Frontera Farmers Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides small capital improvement grants to local family farms.”

Over the last 10 years, the foundation has given out $1.2 million in small grants, he said, and as a result, a “really strong, local agriculture, like the one I’d experienced in Mexico” has gotten off the ground.

“To me, it’s about bringing community together. I look at what we do in our restaurants as being something bigger than just providing nutrition for people.
Clearly, we all have to eat to live, but we don’t have to eat out to live.”

Bayless noted that people dine out to feel certain experiences that are bigger and better than just what is on the plate.

“We take our role as community catalysts very strongly here, and by helping to develop this system of local agriculture, we feel like we’re able to bring sustainability to our community in the sense that, yes, we used less petroleum to bring the things in and yes, more organic [product is] available.”

But, he said, sustainability in the way we think of it has more to do with bringing the community together.

“Once we invested in the local agriculture we had more product and more product meant more farmers’ markets. I think we can all agree that today, the local farmers’ market has taken the place of the old town square, where we used to rub shoulders with people you didn’t always see, but shared topics of conversation with.”

He added that the farmers’ market also became the place where, “We connect with people who give us the things we need to stay alive, and once you’ve made that connection with those people who supply your food, you begin to ask different questions about bigger issues you might be scared about. The issues we ask about become very different when you’re having a conversation with someone who is directly supplying food for you,” he said.

Bayless also noted that being a restaurateur is being a community catalyst — and storyteller.

“Those of us who have restaurants — really anyone, whether you’re an independent restaurateur or part of a chain — you have the opportunity to tell stories,” he said. “When a restaurateur grabs hold of the role of storyteller and starts telling about where the food is coming from and how you can connect with people in your community who have supplied some of it, suddenly the restaurateur takes on a role that is, to me, sort of the ground level of real sustainability.”

But Bayless said his restaurants’ sustainability program is incredibly deep and complicated. “We’re a green-certified restaurant and have a LEED certified build-out at one of our restaurants,” he said. “We take it all very seriously. For me, all of those things are an expression of who we think we are as a restaurant.”

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Sustainable Restaurant Design Is Simple With a Plan

When planning the sustainable build-out of your restaurant, choosing the right equipment, lighting and design materials are integral to ensuring you achieve your goal.

Joe Carbonara, moderator of the session “Seven Ingredients to Creating a Design Facility and Foodservice Operation that Supports the Sustainable Menu”, said when creating or altering building design, operators should:

1. Have a plan and stick to it;
2. Develop a holistic approach;
3. Measure and benchmark to see how you are progressing;
4. Measure your return on investment;
5. Think critically as you go along;
6. Stretch yourself by doing at least one more thing every year; and
7. Keep up building and equipment maintenance.

Commercial design consultant Melanie Smythe added, “There are simple ways to refurbish your building,” and in addition to having a plan, operators should set achievable goals and also make sure their “people are willing to do what they are supposed to be doing” in order to meet and/or increase the facility’s sustainability goals.

In looking at ways to save on energy costs, Smythe recommended creating a start-up/shut-down schedule that people actually use. “You don’t have to turn everything on when you come in,” she said.

Ventilation and exhaust systems continue to use the most energy in restaurants, said Anthony Spata, building systems design director for Hyatt Hotels Corp, Americas. “You can tailor ventilation to what kind of cooking you are doing and to work only as hard as you need it to,” he said.

Carbonara noted that restaurants use five to 10 times more energy per square foot than other businesses, and Spata advised operators to look at their energy bills to figure out where to start conserving.

David Zabrowski, director of engineering for the Food Service Technology Center, suggested equipment purchasers make sure their new equipment is Energy Star rated. “Once you buy it, it will last a long time,” he said. “An advantage of Energy Star equipment is that it’s road-tested.”

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In addressing how operators could improve food-related sustainability practices, Greg Christian, CEO of the Beyond Green: Sustainable Food Partners consultancy, said operators should have either a five-to-10-year strategy for improving their food sustainability or a 10-to-20-year strategy, depending on the length of their supplier contracts. If switching suppliers is planned, operators and their teams should begin to visit farms to connect directly with food sources.

Energy Efficient Best Practices

1. Eliminate idle time for all of your appliances.
2. Only turn on cooking and heating equipment 20 minutes before you need it.
3. Lights, hoods, ranges, signs and fans should all be turned off when not in use.
4. Group the hottest appliances, like broilers, steamers and open burners, under the same vent.
5. Use cold water whenever possible. Insulate hot-water pipes,
6. Train your employees to conserve.
Moving Forward With Sustainability: Waste Not, Want Not

Before taking any steps to reduce waste — energy, packaging or food — ask the right questions first and plan reduction efforts wisely.

Caitlin Leibert, head of sustainability for Chipotle Mexican Grill, said that when her company first made a commitment to reduce its carbon footprint, it looked at each item that came in from suppliers to learn which materials were used and how they were delivered to the chain’s restaurants.

After learning those answers, the managers then brought its suppliers into the conversation to determine shared goals.

“Don’t settle for what is out there,” she said. “Research, ask questions and dig in. It’s really just about asking the right questions.”

One item Chipotle is working to reduce usage of is its nonrecyclable plastic straws. Leibert said the company has found a manufacturer willing to use less plastic in the production. Chipotle projects the new, thinner straws will result in the reduction of 6 tons of plastic from the waste stream, and an annual savings of approximately $25,000.

“Small changes with suppliers can have a major impact on the waste stream,” she said.

Richard Young, senior engineer and director of education for the Food Service Technology Center in San Ramon, Calif., recommended operators to ensure any replacement equipment is Energy Star rated.

He also predicted it would take 10 more years before optimized cook lines will be the industry’s norm.

Andrew Shakman, president of LeanPath, an automated food waste tracking system consultancy, said operators should measure the amount of waste they produce on a daily basis and set goals for reducing it and measuring improvement. Restaurateurs that implement these efforts have demonstrated annual food waste reduction of up to 80 percent.

When questioned about the rate of return on investment, or ROI, of being more sustainable, Young said changing lighting brings immediate results by lowering electrical usage and costs. Additionally, he noted that more efficient steamers usually pay for themselves in two years, and some other equipment can take up to four years.

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Most restaurant operators understand that recycling and composting waste material are good for the environment, but many may not know those same practices can save them money.

Recycling is hyper local," he said. "It’s often necessary to engage local governments, waste haulers, landlords and others to work together toward the same goals."

In recent years, Starbucks has set goals for its company-owned stores, including building and certifying them to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED specifications, and to eliminate nonrecyclable cups from its system.

For the test, Habr contracted with the closest composting facility in her area, McGill Environmental Systems, located 75 miles away, to pick up and haul her food waste. The plant turns the organic material into a nutrient-rich product that eventually goes back into the soil to grow more food.

Some of the challenges she overcame in launching the program included training staff and consumers to properly separate recyclables and keeping up with EPA paperwork.

“We saved $220 a month, or $2,640 a year, through landfill diversions,” she said.

Lily Kelly, interim director of the Coalition for Resource Recovery, said finding cost-effective solutions can depend on locating waste haulers who will sell products that result from recycling waste material.

“Our goal is to see paper foodservice packaging turned into valuable materials,” she said.

But, she added, one of the main challenges is much of the infrastructure for converting food and foodservice packaging waste into valuable materials is outside the restaurant owners’ control.

The NRA, along with the Grocery Manufacturers Association and Food Marketing Institute, have created the Food Waste Reduction Alliance, whose goals are to reduce food waste sent to landfills and increase food donated to food banks.

Organic material, like food waste, can be turned into nutrient-rich compost.
Celebrity chef Rick Bayless, owner-operator of Frontera Grill, Topolobampo and Xoco restaurants in Chicago, Tim Fitzgerald, senior policy analyst for the Environmental Defense Fund in Washington, D.C., and Charlie Arnot, CEO of the Center for Food Integrity in Gladstone, Mo., agreed that many consumers today want to see the businesses they frequent operating sustainably.

“I see my role of restaurateur as a community catalyst…. This is the ground level of real sustainability,” Bayless said.

The EDF’s Tim Fitzgerald, a marine biologist and a leading member of the organization’s Oceans Program, said its goal is to end overfishing worldwide.

“There are too many boats chasing too few fish,” he said. “Seventy percent of the global fish supply is maxed out.”

Fish is fundamentally different from other foods served in restaurants because 90 percent of it is imported. But, he said, today half of the fish consumed in the United States is farm-raised and that the amount is growing fast.

“U.S. fisheries really matter,” he said, adding that domestic fisheries have restored many fish through the EDF’s Catch Shares and Gulf Wild sustainability programs, which limit overfishing in many U.S. waters. He indicated that the group wants to expand the program to other areas going forward.

From a business perspective, incorporating sustainability into a restaurant operation not only resonates with consumers, but also helps build credibility, the Center for Food Integrity’s Arnot said. But, he cautioned, operators must balance being ethically grounded with profitability.

Furthermore, he stated, restaurants that develop a socially conscious reputation with the public often allow that company to operate with minimal formalized restrictions (e.g., ordinances).

“People are more likely to act on what they feel rather than on what they believe,” Arnot pointed out. “You have a wonderful opportunity to help people understand your commitment to responsible sourcing.”

Bayless addressed possible increased cost of serving sustainable foods by saying, “We first and foremost have to stay in business. But we aren’t going to give up on our convictions. We will find the balance in the middle.”

Four Keys to Food Sustainability

1. Embrace the local community and its flavors.
2. Do not overuse certain food sources, like seafood.
3. Be socially responsible, but be profitable.
4. Choose one topic/theme a year and stick with it: these are complex and challenging issues.

STUMPED BY SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD?

Ask your seafood supplier the following:

1. Fish’s country of origin?
2. Is the fish wild-caught or farmed?
3. How was the fish caught?
4. How do they verify the authenticity?

If they cannot answer, get a new fishmonger.

Food sustainability is primarily representative of three things: embracing the local community and its flavors, veering away from overusing certain food sources, such as some types of seafood, and conducting business in socially responsible, but profitable ways.

Food Sustainability: Mix Social Responsibility And Profitability With Dash of Local Flavor
Rethinking Social Responsibility: Don’t Just Give Back; Create Value

Today, especially among millennial consumers who tend to eat out more than other generational members do, expectations are higher that restaurants will participate in corporate responsibility.

Because of the immediacy of social media, corporate values and responsibility are now instantly transparent to consumers, consultant Denise Lee Yohn said. As a result, progressive companies pay great attention to considering which efforts are right for their business.

Yohn also noted that the National Restaurant Association has estimated that the industry donates approximately $38 billion annually to charity.

The idea is not to “give back,” which implies that a company is giving back something that needs to be paid back, but, rather, to create value, she said. She defined the objective as reinforcing a brand’s message and increasing its differentiation from competitors while advancing its social relevance.

Yohn suggested that instead of simply supporting external charitable programs, companies should become a force for positive social change.

“When your social efforts speak to your values, your brand creates value for all your stakeholders that is far broader, deeper and longer-lasting than your commercial footprint,” she said. “There is a growing belief that generating a profit and achieving social progress are not mutually exclusive.”

Don Fox, president and CEO of the 619-unit Firehouse Subs sandwich chain, noted that his company’s philanthropic program of raising money to help first responders and public safety organizations has resonated with customers in the communities it serves, saying, “It’s a shared value [we have with them].”

Fox said relevant philanthropy is built into Firehouse’s mission statement, which is to carry on the brand’s commitment and passion for healthful and flavorful food, heartfelt service and public safety. The brand created its Firehouse Subs Public Safety Foundation in 2005.

As part of its commitment, the founders match a percentage of the donations received from each restaurant, Fox said. Franchisees are rated on the percentage of sales they donate to the cause.

“We’ve made great progress on building the culture,” he said. “The most successful franchisees believe that being socially involved helps their sales.”

To date, the company and franchisees have raised a total of $6.3 million, primarily for fire department equipment.

**How to Be Socially Responsible**

1. Give consideration to efforts that align with your business model.
2. Don’t just give back; create value.
3. Become a force for positive social change.
4. Make sure your philanthropy is relevant.
Global Leaders Address Sustainability in the Food Supply Chain

Aware that close to 1 billion people around the world are malnourished and one-third of the world’s food supply is wasted, corporate foodservice and nonprofit leaders are attempting to change those statistics.

Overcoming poverty as the world’s 7 billion people grow to a projected 9 billion by 2050 is critical, said Mahendra Lohani, executive vice president of the Asia/South Pacific division of Heifer International, a global leader in small farm development in low-income countries. The good news is there are still opportunities to increase food productivity, he said.

Heifer International helps to connect foods produced in Third World countries — such as spices, coffee, honey, cocoa, pork and beef — to private sector supply chains. These connections empower communities and individuals, especially women, to break the cycle of poverty, Lohani said.

Moderator Jesse LaRose, president of ESE Solutions, a consulting firm that helps companies implement sustainability strategies, noted that since its inception in 2005, The Clinton Global Initiative has impacted 400 million lives in 183 countries. Environmental stewardship is a primary focus of the organization, which was founded by former President Bill Clinton to address significant global challenges.

In addition to its seafood sustainability programs, Darden also is increasing its sourcing of sustainable beef, in cooperation with the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association.

Regarding what to do with perishable prepared food that ends up not being sold at specific meal times, Tidwell said many of its restaurants freeze it and partner with organizations able to pick up the food and deliver it to local food banks.

Hospitality conglomerate Hilton Worldwide, which runs 2,500 restaurants and bars in its fullservice and luxury hotels, has a major focus on reducing its food waste, said Jennifer Silberman, its vice president of corporate responsibility. Many of its restaurants and banquet departments also arrange to deliver freshly prepared food to soup kitchens, food banks and other community agencies.
Ted Turner: Media Mogul Turns Sustainability Pioneer

Entrepreneur Ted Turner’s commitment to environmentalism is changing the way the restaurant industry practices sustainability.

At this year’s NRA Show, a group of Ted Turner’s closest advisers addressed his pledge — through the philanthropic Turner Foundation — to help protect some of the earth’s endangered resources, from its oceans to North America’s bison herds to Russia’s salmon strongholds, to name a few.

The Foundation also has contributed more than $1 million to the National Restaurant Association’s Conserve Sustainability Solutions Education Program, which educates restaurateurs on best sustainable practices for their businesses.

Mike Finley, the Foundation’s president and treasurer, said it is Turner’s love of wildlife that started him on his sustainable journey.

“Mr. Turner founded the Turner Foundation in 1991,” Finley said. “Ted has always had a love for wildlife, even as a young man. It was that love of wildlife — that association with the habitat — that actually supported and led him on the path to realize that all of the things we do impact something somewhere.”

It is Turner, an environmental steward since starting a friendship with explorer-conservationist Jacques Cousteau in the 1980s, who best demonstrates how to successfully mix sustainability and capitalism together, said Todd Wilkinson, author of “The Last Stand: Ted Turner’s Quest to Save a Troubled Planet.”

“I once had an interview with Mikhail Gorbachev and he said he knew of no private citizen in history with a wider resume of conservation and humanitarian accomplishments coupled with his business achievements, including a World Series,” Wilkinson said.

His partnership with George McKerrow Jr. has made a big sustainable impact on the restaurant industry. Their 44-unit Ted’s Montana Grill casual-dining chain is credited not only with pushing the industry’s sustainability drive forward, but also giving new life to the U.S. bison ranching industry. McKerrow, who knew Turner casually before going into business with him, said they both were interested in preserving the bison herd and agreed that creating a market for the product would not only help grow the herd, but fix a long-broken industry.

“I’d been intrigued about the bison, thought it was a wonderful product and tried to help the industry get on its feet,” he said. “But it just wasn’t getting anywhere. There wasn’t enough of it for the big [restaurateurs] and not enough of the small independents were going to buy it.

“I had this concept of a classic American grill that featured gourmet hamburgers in my mind for a long time and I thought we could introduce bison,” he continued. “I wrote a one-page document and visited Ted. I’d known him over the years as an acquaintance, and I managed to get in front of him. We shook hands and said, ‘Let’s go build a chain of restaurants.’ ”

Not only did that chain promote good animal husbandry practices, McKerrow said, “it also helped bison ranchers get back on their feet and created a self-sustaining restaurant business.”

The veteran restaurateur said the goal for Ted’s Montana Grill was to build a restaurant that cooked and served all natural food and created a platform that incorporated the latest technology that would help protect the environment and save on costs at the same time. He confirmed that while it has taken some time, the business has and continues to meet the goals it set for itself at its inception. That includes outfitting all of its restaurants with LED lighting fixtures, as well as water- and energy-efficient equipment. He admitted it has been costly, but his return on investment has been greater than the initial spend.

For example, the company spent $111,000 on the systemwide conversion to LED lighting, but saved $140,000 in electric bills the first year and $250,000 in the second year on electricity bills.

I want to say Ted’s Montana Grill was an overnight success after 10 years,” he noted. “That’s the reality of business and dreams. Ted is the best person I’ve ever known. He’s been a mentor for me for many, many years. At the end of the day, he’s patient and he’s steadfast and continues to try until he succeeds. And I think that’s the answer. … The do-good part is not just to help others, but to help [ourselves] do the right things. The bottom line is everything we do [at Ted’s strives to] do good for the industry. It’s fun and exciting and something we can be proud of.”