

6 steps to sustainability

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Wed, 2013-07-17 13:43

New report from NRA offers experts' insight into why sustainability matters and how it can be profitable, too.

If you missed this year's National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show and were interested in its heavy focus on sustainability, fear not, the NRA has you covered. It released a full report —“Bright Ideas: Sustainability Tips From Industry Experts”—that offers tips, trends and best practices from industry experts who spoke during educational sessions at the Chicago show in May.

Implementing those sustainable best practices can not only help the environment, but also improve a company's bottom line, says Scott DeFife, e.v.p., policy and government affairs, NRA.

“You will save money, improve the environment and respond to your employees' and customers' interest,” adds Jeff Clark, the program director for the NRA's Conserve Sustainability Education Program.

The full 12-page report can be [downloaded for free](#), but here are six key takeaways to consider if you're looking into becoming more sustainable.

1) Be a community catalyst. For Rick Bayless, sustainability is all about local communities and local flavors. It's what he set out to do when he came to Chicago in 1987 and opened Frontera Grill. Back then, he says, sustainability wasn't even a term being used. An early partnership with a local spinach grower led to a no-interest loan to the farmer and what has grown into Frontera Farmers Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides small capital improvement grants to local family farms. The end result? Bayless has helped grow his local farming community, and is now benefiting from the flavors their crops produce. His restaurants have grown in large part because he's been able to tell a story about those connections and his uniquely local food.

2) Plan for sustainable design and operations. The first step to sustainable design is proper planning, from choosing the right equipment, lighting and materials, and then sticking to it. The same holds with operational efforts: Make a plan and stick to it. Use Energy Star rated equipment, says David Zabrowski, director of engineering for the Food Service Technology Center, and create a start-up/shut-down schedule, adds commercial design consultant Melanie Smythe.

3) Reducing waste starts with research. When Chipotle Mexican Grill set out to reduce its carbon footprint, the first step was to “research, ask questions and dig in,” says head of sustainability Caitlin Leibert. “It's really just about asking the right questions.” Chipotle started by digging into where each of its supplied items came from, what materials were used and how they were delivered. Andrew Shakman, president of LeanPath, a consulting company focused on reducing waste, says operators should measure their waste on a daily basis and then set out to reduce it.

4) Recycling and composting can save money. Laura Wood Habr, owner and operator of Croc's

19th Street Bistro in Virginia Beach, says recycling food waste has led to lower disposal costs and even reduced purchasing and labor costs. She uses a composting facility that picks up her food waste and turns it into nutrient-rich products that go back into the soil (to grow more food). Finding local solutions that sell products from recycling waste materials is the key.

5) Food sustainability has to be profitable. Bayless stressed that having convictions and helping the environment is important, but staying in business has to come first. By embracing local farmers and their flavors, restaurants can tell a story that customers will pay to hear. Consumers also want to know you're not abusing a food source, like seafood, for example. So think about where and how your fish are being harvested, and then tell that story to your customers.

6) Social responsibility matters. "There is a growing belief that generating a profit and achieving social progress are not mutually exclusive," says consultant Denise Lee Yohn, which was the exact point Howard Schultz, Starbucks' c.e.o., made during his NRA keynote address. Customers want to connect with their brands of choice, and social responsibility can help drive that connection.

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