

Environment:

Going environmental needs groundwork

WHEN IT COMES TO RECYCLING PACKAGING FROM HOTELS AND MOTELS, THERE ARE FEW SIMPLE SOLUTIONS. EVERYONE KNOWS ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MORE IMPORTANT TO THE NEW ZEALAND MARKET

given its clean green image, but the understanding of what is the best environmental option is still very poor.

We always hear words like sustainable, biodegradable, degradable, recyclable or compostable; but what is the best option to use and are these as good for the environment as you think? Now more than ever, with environmental ratings and public expectations, it is time that this is clearly understood so that informed decisions and debate can be had within the hospitality industry when properties make the decision to go environmental.

When looking at going environmental with your packaging, the first step is to go direct to the source and discuss the options available with your supplier. At the end of the day, your suppliers should know the best environmental options for their product and the best way to process them; if they don't then look at finding a supplier who does.

To save time and costs, also look for suppliers that have environmental programmes already set in place for their products to save you researching this yourself. It will also give you the confidence to know that they have spent the time and energy in coming up with a solution for their products if they have gone to this kind of trouble. If you have simply been told that a product is biodegradable or recyclable, then make sure you get confirmation in writing with any accreditation if available. There are too many examples of companies that verbally market their products as being environmentally friendly, but do not have the grounds or knowledge to back it up.

If after all this, you do not have any luck sourcing this information from your suppliers, then there are many organisations, or even your local councils, that offer good information on products. Issues like recycling and reusing waste are quite well documented, but be prepared to spend time in searching for the information you want.

Once you have all the options available, you then need to assess which is the best solution in the environment that you operate within. If you truly want to go environmental, then you need to be aware that what may seem initially like the best option on the surface may not actually end up being the case. Some key examples that we come up against in the hotel market are:

- **Degradable plastic bottles** – We get asked for these all the time and they can easily be made. The fact is they are primarily designed to be 'composted' and not thrown into our landfill. We don't yet have suitable commercial composting systems or standards in New Zealand and these bottles simply will not break down in landfill, which is where they end up. Not only that, but if they get into the recycling system, they can cause further problems by getting mixed up with bottles that are designed to be recycled. There have been a number of recent articles written in the NZ Herald on this very point.
- **Recyclable products** – Many products are recyclable and will be promoted as such, but you need to check whether they can be recycled in your area. As an example, most of our ranges are in bottles as opposed to tubes for the main reason that cosmetic tubes are currently only recyclable in Auckland.
- **Sustainable products** – When checking whether a product is sustainable or not, take into account where the product is coming

from. Many third world countries claim sustainable products, but only after they have recently or are in the process of clearing native rainforest to plant the crops that are now marketed as being sustainable.'

These are just a few of the type of things that need to be looked into when choosing a particular product option that you wish to pursue. Unfortunately, sometimes you will find that the seller of the product is more concerned about the marketing opportunity of the claim as opposed to its true environmental worth.

As you can see, there are products on the market that are promoted as being environmental but cannot actually be processed correctly in the environment in which they are marketed. In many circumstances, one option over the other can be relatively subjective with even the experts arguing over which is better, with no current definitive answer.

You may find, like us, that you end up having a mixture of options, depending on your product mix. Within our own company we have chosen to promote recycling of some products, while others we have chosen to make degradable that are designed for landfill. At the end of the day each product is different, based upon its nature, its intended use and the facilities available in your area to process it.

By the time you are ready to make your final decision on how you are going to progress, there are two areas in which you want to be clear on so you do not end up going backwards.

Firstly, you need to fully understand everything you are going to be promoting. The more you research and the more you understand, the more confident you will be in standing behind your choice and being able to explain to interested parties when the need arises. A common term emerging in the marketplace is 'greenwashing' and by jumping on the green bandwagon without the foundation to back it up, you risk getting caught up in this area. You will not get criticised for doing a small step well, but they will react negatively for biting off more than you can chew.

Secondly, you need to ensure that the environmental product and process you choose is 'fit for purpose.' While there is always compromise, the steps and changes you make can end up affecting the guests' stay to the point where they do not want to come back and enjoy the hotel experience. Guests will always appreciate a hotel taking an environmental stance, but if they have to sit in the dark at night, use scratchy towels and wash their hair with shampoo out of a bulk dispenser, then you may no longer be regarded as a pleasant place to stay. The key is to come up with practical solutions which do not end up ruining the guests' experience, while at the same time showing that you are taking a solid stance.

Choosing to go environmental can sometimes be complicated and time consuming, but choosing suppliers that have done the groundwork for you will end up saving you both time and money.

As a supplier, we have spent the best part of the last two years researching and coming up with what we believe are the best options for our market and it will be an ever evolving process as technology and systems change, so keep an open mind to change over time. The benefits of this change are not only to the environment, but also of people's perception of your hotel when compared to others. This is especially the case in a country where a higher standard of environmental responsibility is expected as being the status quo. ■



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