

Sustainability – a closed loop is the answer

WE ALL KNOW OUR PLANET is changing. We constantly hear about climate change, carbon emissions, environmental impact etc, etc. Whether we take any notice of it or not at present is really up to us. Isn't it?

And yet in many other countries there is now huge pressure on everyone, from producer to consumer, to act in a sustainable manner. In Europe and the UK, for example, companies are fined for not recycling and penalised for excessive waste.

For whatever reason, we appear to be slower to catch on here in New Zealand and continue to dent our clean green image constantly.

Maybe there is a lot of misunderstanding about sustainability.

As part of my research for this feature I visited cafés around Auckland to see how much they understood about sustainability and what they were doing.

The response may not necessarily reflect the industry as a whole but it does indicate that cafés need to understand sustainability and they need help to make the changes.

Of the cafés I spoke to, most didn't see sustainability as something they need pay a lot of attention to. It wasn't a major factor of their business and those that did recycle some of their waste only did it to reduce waste removal costs or because their council required them to do so. The main items recycled were cardboard and paper. Virtually no one recycled plastic or glass bottles or cans (tin or aluminium).

And yet a few cafés that actually made the customer aware of their sustainable approach to their businesses were actually experiencing business growth and a lot of encouraging customer feedback about what they were doing. Becoming more sustainable was good for their business.

Manufacturers to the food service industry, who are working towards more sustainable practices, are also receiving increased enquiries for products that have less environmental impact.

Take Health Pak, for example. The company is a New Zealand family owned business that produces on average 250 million products a year including packaging in excess of 350 tonnes of sugar into convenience use products such as sugar sticks and sachets.

With this quantity of products going out into the environment it has become increasingly important for Health Pak to find packaging solutions that have minimal impact on the environment.

James (Jimi) Kennedy-Grant of Health Pak says one of the issues for the company has been that although the packaging they use for sugar sticks and sachets is made of sustainable paper, in order to prevent moisture interfering with the contents, the packaging up until now has been lined with a thin layer of plastic (PE) which at the same time prevents complete environmental breakdown.

After considerable research, Health Pak is now converting its sugar sticks and sachets packaging to be lined with EPI. EPI is named after Environmental Plastics Incorporated who developed an oxo-biodegradable plastic additive that when applied to various plastics enables control of the use life and degradation rate of the packaging in various disposal environments. In other words the packaging will break down over a shorter period to drastically reduce environmental impact.

Kennedy-Grant says: "If you think of a sachet of sugar, most people think it is paper. The outside is paper, sure, but the inside is PE (plastic) and because the paper is bonded to the PE it's not going to breakdown no matter what you think. So by making the PE break down it allows the whole sachet to degrade. And what it does is it allows the packaging to degrade and then once it has degraded it biodegrades. So rather than, for example, taking 10,000 years to breakdown it will take about three years."

What about the debate over recycling plastic packaging? The reality is it just isn't feasible for some products, says Kennedy-Grant.

"We have been very, very careful about producing degradable packaging for products that are unable to be recycled. There's no point producing degradable packaging for something that can be recycled. That sends horrifically conflicting messages that undo decades worth of encouraging people to recycle. So for us as a packaging company it's about the products that can't be recycled and working on those ones for degradable packaging and the ones that can be recycled, making sure that we work with our customers and our customers' customers to get as much of that recycled as possible."

What happens though if you make a product that you want people to recycle but which you lose control over once you have supplied it to the customer? How can you get your customer to get their customers to recycle when there is no system in place to achieve this?

It's a point not lost on packaging company, Huhtamaki who make a huge range of products including one-use hot



It's not just about being green

THE WORD SUSTAINABILITY TENDS TO MAKE US THINK

immediately about environmental issues, 'greenies' and saving the planet.

However, for a business to function in a completely sustainable way we need to look at the different types of sustainability – economic, ethical/social and environmental and how they affect what we do and the way we operate our business.

Economic sustainability means running your business in an efficient way so that it keeps going.

Ethical/social sustainability is about building good relationships with everyone you deal with from suppliers and staff through to customers and the community you operate in.

Environmental sustainability is about your use and care of natural resources.

In each of these areas you can gradually make a difference to what you do, which will in turn benefit you and your business.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY:

- ▶ assess your production cycle and monthly balance sheets to see where there are excessive costs. It may mean that you change products you use, reduce kitchen waste, reduce serving sizes if food is not being fully consumed, or turn your equipment to stand-by mode when not in use. By taking a closer look at how you operate you will be able to identify weak areas of your business and rectify them
- ▶ market your business. Assuming people will know about you is like turning your back on heaps of potential customers. Advertise your business, have promotions to encourage new and repeat business, display daily specials, label and price all food, provide your staff with uniforms with your business branding on them, hand out coffee cards to customers when they order.

ETHICAL/SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY:

- ▶ build good relationships with suppliers by showing loyalty to those that are fair and loyal to you
- ▶ care about your customers by offering polite, good service, consistent quality food and beverages at realistic prices and thank them for their custom
- ▶ realise the value good staff make to your business by encouraging career development, reward performance and initiatives, offer benefits such as paid training and subsidised health insurance for permanent full time staff
- ▶ hold regular meetings with staff to brainstorm ideas to help the business and be prepared to listen to concerns they may have.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY:

- ▶ where possible buy products that are packed in recyclable or biodegradable materials and dispose of them appropriately
- ▶ set up recycle bins and train your staff to use them
- ▶ if you package food or drinks to take away try to provide them in recyclable or biodegradable packaging
- ▶ buy local and seasonal where possible
- ▶ monitor water use
- ▶ monitor what goes down the drains and prevent fats and oils being washed down the drains
- ▶ use recycled paper for kitchen use, menus, toilet paper etc
- ▶ monitor and reduce power
- ▶ support environmental projects. ☕



drink and cold drink cups.

While the company has a strong commitment to sustainability within its working practices there are concerns that solving the problems of environmental waste are being placed unrealistically on the manufacturers only.

When speaking to Ron Hill, sales and marketing manager of Huhtamaki, he raised the point that the issue of waste and recycling needed to be a closed loop approach that involved the manufacturer, the supplier, the consumer, the governing council and the recycler. What is needed he says, is everyone taking responsibility. In the case of coffee cups, Huhtamaki would do whatever it could to produce a sustainable product but it was then up to the supplier and the consumer to make sure the used cup went in a specific collection bin and that local authorities, as part of their recycled waste collection, picked up the cups and sent them on for recycling.

He pointed out that plastic is a value material which is not going to go away, so rather than trying to find ways to produce plastic that biodegrades, we should be looking at ways of getting used plastic back so that it can be recycled.

For Huhtamaki, the current situation is that the paper products it produces are made of paperboard, certified for sustainability, but with PE coating which means it doesn't meet the market for a biodegradable product. Research on the use of alternative boards with different coatings, including PLA, a vegetable based starch is progressing.

Because of the large volume Huhtamaki produces, before it changes to any 'green' alternative it is essential that the company can be sure of continuity of supply and that the resources for the product are produced under sustainable practices. It also has to be viable as a long-term option.

"...if at the moment we were to produce total production in bio-board there are not facilities for the collection or disposal of it anyway."

So where does this leave the café owner?

Those that are developing sustainable initiatives are seeing the benefits and it does also make sense to reduce your waste removal costs.

By setting up collection bins for glass bottles, plastic bottles, cardboard and paper, and educating your staff about using them, you will at least be making some difference to the environment by reducing your waste.

What step you take from there is up to you. The following article, It's not just about being green, may help you plan your next step. ☕

- Cynthia Daily