Restaurant Sustainability Program

Executive Summary

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The impact of the restaurant industry on global sustainability poses a unique challenge due to the industry's large size, fast-paced environment, low profit margins for companies, powerful industry inertia, and consumer behavior. Approaching restaurant operations through a sustainability lens provides the opportunity for strategies that could reduce some negative consequences that arise from traditional restaurant operations. This project attempts to do just that. Using benchmark data and industry best practices, the project addresses and improves upon one local restaurant’s waste stream, energy and water consumption, as well as where the restaurant sources their product.

The project partner for this project was a medium-sized full service restaurant. The company operates nine restaurants across Oregon, Arizona, and Texas. With plans to open two additional locations in 2019. Although the restaurant agreed to implement the proposed sustainability plan, the CEO made it clear that the company's primary goal was profit. If they could reduce their environmental impact while saving money, that would just be “icing on the cake.”

While the project partner may not have had altruistic motives in mind when they agreed to implement this project. I was not deterred. I was confident that a business case could be made for mitigating the restaurant’s negative environmental impacts.

Before any solutions could be implemented at the restaurant, however, the current operations of the restaurant needed to be better understood. Therefore, the first step in the project involved collecting benchmark data for water and energy consumption, the amount of waste produced, and where food is being sourced from.

Audits were manually performed to collect data in each of these four categories. This was a slow and tedious process with electricity and food sourcing data needing to be collected by calling each company or manufacturer individually.
The preliminary benchmark data supports the assumption that the project partner can be considered an “average” restaurant in terms of these four major categories. Electricity and water consumption is comparable to the national average as well as the size and composition of their waste stream. Although many of the restaurant’s suppliers could not be traced to the source. A large enough picture of their supply chain could be pieced together to confidently say that almost none of their product is sourced locally.

Although the benchmark data suggests the project partner is currently operating as an average restaurant. This does not have to be the case. With a few simple changes the restaurant can greatly improve their environmental performance and begin the transition to a more sustainable restaurant. Examples of some of these suggested changes include: installation of LED lighting, efficient appliances and fixtures, implementing composting, and creating a dish for the seasonal menu that is made from 100% locally sourced products.

These suggestions could reduce the restaurants water consumption by nearly 50%, energy consumption by 5-10%, and the amount of waste sent to landfill by over 50%. On top of these reductions in the restaurant’s environmental impact, the restaurant would save tens of thousands of dollars each year from reduced utility bills.

These savings demonstrate the business case that can be made for implementing sustainability practices into an existing company. While these changes are an improvement to the restaurant’s current operations, they are not enough to create a completely sustainable restaurant. However, I believe taking these first few steps toward more sustainable practices will demonstrate to the project partner the tangible and intangible benefits of becoming a sustainable enterprise.

Although the restaurant industry as a whole is not sustainable and the analysis done as part of this project, demonstrates that the project partner is currently no exception. These unsustainable practices are not all conscious choices by restaurant owners. They are being driven by a multitude of diverse causes such as: customer expectations, corporate structures, municipal infrastructure and policy, industry inertia, and employee behavior. Although my project identified and addressed some of the largest negative environmental impacts caused through restaurant operations. It did not do much to investigate the social consequences associated with the restaurant industry.

Future investigations would do well, to add to the full picture of restaurant sustainability, to examine social elements surrounding the current industry model. Including; high-employee turnover rates, self-reported well-being, drug abuse rates, wage equality, and the gratuity system.
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Combining these findings with the environmental picture and sustainability plan outlined in this project would give a much more complete picture of the unsustainable nature of the current restaurant model in the United States.