The Importance of Sustainability to the Hospitality Industry

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Sustainability has been around for many years all over the world and in different practices and industries. It took the hospitality industry some time to catch up with the movement, and now sustainability and "going green" is standard vocabulary in most hospitality operations. The main reason it took the hospitality industry some time to catch up was the concern of costs associated with sustainability. Lessons were quickly learned that the bottom line is not going suffer as originally was thought, and in fact there are several incentives to green initiatives.

In recent years, sustainability gained popularity in the United States driven by government initiatives, business entrepreneurship, generational ideology, and the pop cultures' understanding that we, as a society, must preserve our planet for future generations. Sustainability is no longer the business of small community groups or organizations like Greenpeace. It has become an urgent matter to many circles in society.

The hospitality industry at large is a major player in advancing sustainable systems to better the planet, save energy, increase profits, and cater to today's more consciences consumers. There are pockets in the United States where restaurants, hotels, private clubs, cruiselines, airlines, and other hospitality operations are expected to practice some sort of sustainability in order to attract customers. In South Florida, there are several established as well as up and coming restaurants that focus on local and sustainable purchasing. TAP 42 in Fort Lauderdale purchases all their fruits and vegetables from Marando Farms - a local organic farm located literally behind the restaurant. Additional restaurants currently focusing on sustainable purchasing include Edge Steak & Bar at the Four Seasons hotel in Miami, Box Park in Miami, and The Cypress Room in the design district in Miami.

Sustainability is beyond recycling. John Hardman, Ph.D. in his book "Leading for Regeneration: Going Beyond Sustainability in Business, Education, and Community" refers to sustainability as "The need for a profound cultural shift toward regenerative human systems" and how regenerative and sustainable organizations are driven by the sense of a higher purpose.
We are witnessing the sense of a higher purpose in several areas of the hospitality industry. More restaurants and food service operations are looking for alternative purchasing – focusing on locally grown products and buying from local farmers markets. Chefs are trying to avoid purchasing carrots that travel for over 1,000 miles to get to their restaurant if they can purchase from a local grower 5 miles away from the restaurant.

In hotels, it is now a common practice to reuse towels and bed sheets. Some hotels made it their goal to become LEED certified as part of their strategic planning and allocate funds towards the process. The private club industry is looking at more sustainable ways to maintain their golf

courses and reduce waste in their kitchens by creating more sustainable menus and cross utilization of products.

The hospitality industry serves millions of patrons in different ways on daily basis. Research suggests that the importance of "being green" is driven by the newer generation of customers – Generation Y also known as the "Millenials." Several studies suggest that Generation Y patrons will prefer to spend their money in an operation that practices some sort of sustainability and care for the environment. A survey conducted by DAGGS (Deloitte Automotive Group Generation Y Survey) asked respondents to elaborate on the importance of the environment independent of economic constraints. The results demonstrated that Gen Y does have concern for the environment when making purchases. Hospitality operators are shifting towards the need to cater to the younger generation of customers by addressing what is important to Generation Y and becoming "greener."

Additional advantages to investors in the hospitality industry are governmental programs, grants, and tax breaks for those who pursue alternative energy, implement environmentally-friendly practices, and constantly seek ways to make their operation more energy efficient.

There are, however, some customers that prefer the "old ways" of doing business. Hotel managers report random complaints from customers who felt their room was not clean enough since the bed sheets are not replaced every day. The response to such complaints can be addressed in one of two ways: either explain to the customer that this is the new norm, or following up with the customer's request to replace the bed sheets every day to keep the customer happy. Either way is fine, depends on the organization's commitment to becoming more sustainable and environmentally-friendly.

Sustainability can be viewed as a trend that, in my opinion, is not going to die down any time soon. Dr. Hardman states in his book that "We simply cannot continue doing business the same way we have. It is now time for a paradigm shift - a different way of thinking - that is more global than individual."

Hospitality operations should strive to become more self-sustained not only to meet their consumer demand but also to reduce cost and seek for alternative and more efficient ways of doing business. There are different options. It is simply a matter of seeking information utilizing the abundance of sources available today to learn more on how sustainability impacts us all as a society.

Sources:

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