

The Philosophy of Sustainability



More than a tactic or even a strategy, sustainability is becoming a retail doctrine

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Sustainability is one of the most popular buzzwords in today's food world, yet adopting a sustainability model can feel like opening Pandora's box. Challenges include the very definition of the issue, balancing what consumers say they want with their actual buying habits, and managing costs.

Even in this time of economic turmoil, sustainability issues are still in the forefront; in fact, many people see green initiatives as one path out of the current turbulence. Food retailers that treat sustainability as a tactic or even a short-term strategy risk failing to understand what could very well be the most important trend in contemporary business.

Taking on the issue of sustainability means looking into the future. "As energy costs rise and economic conditions continue to become a concern to many Americans, consumers will continue to evaluate their purchasing decisions," shares Chad Pawlak, president of Grass Point Farms, an organic farming operation that produces grass-fed dairy products, in Thorp, WI. "Grass Point and other companies must understand the economics of the country but [still] remain committed to a fair and sustainable farm-to-market model. Cheap food, like cheap credit, was a bubble we all lived through, but it's time to look longer term at what cheap food really costs the environment, communities, banks, and our health and vitality."

Megan Warmouth, project manager for Chicago, IL-based Gordon Hanrahan, Inc., representing Unilever Foodsolutions (Hellmann's, Knorr, Lipton), Desert Glory NatureSweet Tomatoes, and Carlisle Foodservice Products, explains, "At this point, by promoting sustainability and sustainable practices, you're at the head of the pack, helping to educate consumers about what sustainability is and how it affects the food they eat. Patrons are more conscience of companies and brands committed to green and sustainable practices — and they make an added effort to deal with those companies. It's not just a Gen Y issue. Gen X and Boomers are looking at this as a brand and company attribute."

Ryan Till, product manager for Avon, OH-based Carroll Manufacturing & Sales (CMS), which offers a complete line of food packaging under the Flavorseal brand, recognizes the paradox inherent in sustainability issues. "Consumers are increasingly growing conscious of environmentally friendly packaging. However, in the current economic environment, cost is the dominant factor influencing purchasing decisions at the deli. Sustainable packaging influences only a small percentage of consumers at this point, but growing awareness of sustainable packaging will increasingly influence buying decisions. This is very important to deli business."

Defining The Issues

The simple question of defining sustainability leads to many answers but it is, essentially, a comprehensive philosophy. According to Maria Brous, director of media and community relations for Publix Super Markets, Inc., based in Lakeland,

FL, “Sustainability means balancing the needs of humanity with the needs of the living earth. It’s meeting today’s demands without compromising what’s essential for tomorrow. That’s why Publix got into a Green Routine in 2001 — long before being eco-savvy was chic. We started making smarter choices to enrich the quality of life of our associates, our customers and our planet.”

“We view sustainability in multiple parts,” explains Bruce Miller, president of Groucho’s Franchise Systems in Columbia, SC. The company owns, operates and franchises 21 Groucho’s Deli units, having evolved from a purely retail deli to mostly foodservice restaurants. “Part of it has to do with the quality of the product we serve. This has worked for multiple, multiple generations and hopefully will continue — and for us that’s sustainable. Then you have the external environmental things such as wax paper and plates. When we view product change, we take a comprehensive view from customer perception to quality to cost impacts to the impact on our legacy.”

Some focus mainly on the environmental aspect. “Sustainability is responsible packaging,” says CMS’ Till. “This means responsibility in terms of the effect it has on our environment, using less energy getting packaging to market, monitoring the creation of waste, and increasing safety for consumers throughout the life cycle of the product.

“Look at using less packaging to get product to market, such as fewer overwraps, thinner plastics, etc. Packaging life cycle is another area,” he continues. “The deli will progress into the sustainable mind-sets with more recyclable or reusable packaging options. Finally, packaging responsibility plays a role when the deli demands environmentally responsible barrier resins to keep their products fresh. Certain types of oxygen barrier resins cannot be recycled, or their production may cause negative environmental effects.”

Others link sustainability to a comprehensive resource and production view. “To our organization, sustainability means managing our resources wisely,” reports Hanna Sjolund, marketing manager for InnoWare, Inc. in Alpharetta, GA. “We do this by using recycled materials, by designing our packaging to reduce the amount of plastic and, wherever possible, using raw materials from annually renewable resources that also can be composted. Our Eco line of packaging helps to decrease fossil fuel use and lower greenhouse emissions when compared to the production of traditional plastics.”

“We define sustainability as the ability to utilize resources at a rate and in a way not negatively impacting the environment, health of the cows or the prosperity of the family farmer,” explains Grass Point’s Pawlak. “We

go further by producing a product with a scientific increase in naturally occurring health attributes and a richer, creamier flavor as a result of diets rich in grasses/pastures.”

But as with many environmental and social issues, sincerity is the root of success for a sustainability program. “Customers will expect a sincere approach to improve the environment, use of energy, use of raw materials, etc. and thus sustain it for future generations,” cautions Brous. “As with food safety, sustainability should be viewed not as a competitive tactic but as a social responsibility for everyone.”

**“TO OUR ORGANIZATION,
SUSTAINABILITY MEANS
MANAGING OUR
RESOURCES WISELY.”**

— HANNA SJOLUND
INNOWARE, INC.

Putting It To Practice

Sustainability in the deli is an important issue because of the high percentage of take-out containers used. Yet operators report great results with just small steps. “Using recycled paper, biodegradable packaging or energy efficient equipment can make a big impact and consumers notice these,” Hanrahan’s Warmouth explains.

Brous reports, “At the Publix Deli, we focus on the following three issues in regards to sustainability: emphasis on domestic versus imported cheese; paper versus plastic where possible and still protect the quality of the product; and we expect our suppliers to demonstrate sustainability efforts as well.”

Deli operators large and small are already implementing unique and easy changes. “Groucho’s has taken a proactive approach to reducing our carbon footprint,” says Miller. “Most recently we got rid of our Styrofoam plates, switching to wax paper and baskets. We reduced our waste about 33 percent system-wide.

“Our cup and to-go box manufacturers that are still using Styrofoam have made proactive steps to maximize efficiency, promote environmental attributes and develop new products,” he continues. “Our cup manufacturer has provided us with material explaining how making foam cups creates less waste than plastic-lined paper cups because it uses less energy to produce, it doesn’t hurt the ozone layer, and it’s 90 percent air.

Groucho’s also uses a dishwashing system called OptiFill as a component of its sustainability initiative. “OptiFill automatically dilutes the concentrate according to the

amount of water dispensed through the system,” according to Deric Rosenbaum, president of Franchise Consulting and Services Corp., Columbia, SC, which manages and launches new Groucho’s Deli units and is also a franchise owner. “This not only prevents chemical waste, but it also reduces the amount of transportation required to ship the product. This means zero product waste as well as not putting excess chemicals into the sewer systems.”

Operators are cautioned to look at the entire life cycle of a product to make good decisions regarding sustainable practices. “Paper is not always eco friendly,” warns InnoWare’s Sjolund. “You cannot recycle paper with plastic coating. Look for BPI-approved [Biodegradable Products Institute] packaging meeting the ASTM [American Society for Testing and Material] standard for compostability. Look at the whole life cycle of the package. Where is it made? Is it made from a sustainable material thereby reducing fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions? What is the end of life of this package? Since most packaging ends up in landfills rather than going back into the recycling stream, we recommend deli operators look at how the package is made rather than focusing on the end-of-life aspect where we have little control.”

Franchise Consulting’s Rosenbaum adds, “We’ve looked at many options like compostable containers, paper cups, etc., but many of them are just not cost effective in any way, shape or form. And, how many people go home at end of the day with a compostable to-go box or dinnerware and actually take it to a composting facility? They don’t, they put it in their trash and it goes to a municipal trash dump.”

Small changes in packaging can reap big benefits. “Going to the Groucho’s branded wax paper on a natural product printed with soy ink was a natural step and it has really reduced the carbon footprint in the amount of aggregate trash we produce at the end of the day for all of our units,” explains Rosenbaum.

Support From All Sides

The deli cannot stand alone in this issue. “A department cannot address this matter independent of the rest of the company,” cautions Publix’s Brous. “There must be a clear stance by the company with a tangible halo effect over each area of operations.”

Many manufacturers in the deli arena have established corporate and brand sustainability initiatives and provide support to their deli customers. “Carlisle Foodservice Products has many items helping back of house with waste and water management and efficiency,” says Warmouth. “Desert Glory NatureSweet Tomatoes has established an environmentally sound process of production from soil to shipment. Unilever,

and its foodservice branch, Unilever Food-solutions, has developed a global sustainability initiative ranging from office practices to the certification of its entire tea category, Lipton, by the Rainforest Alliance by 2015. The Rainforest Alliance ensures ethical and sustainable practices within the communities where Lipton Teas are grown.”

“A lot of everything we do and every decision we make back here at the corporate office is based on the tradition of how my grandfather believed in quality as the most important ingredient in a sandwich,” Groucho’s Miller explains. “He believed in giving back to the community and looking out for your community and this is what we preach to each new franchise in each new location we open. So something like switching over to wax paper from foam plates is actually in the tradition of my granddad — doing what’s good for the community without being asked to do it. Just doing it because you know what’s right.”

What Can You Do?

The most important first — and continuing — step for deli operators is to engage the concept. “Do not ignore the issue,” advises Publix’s Brous. “Seek to understand how to promote sustainability in a tangible, clearly defined way.”

Promoting your commitment to sustain-

ability will help consumers who are looking to make the commitment as well. “Operators can promote their deli as the consumer champion for sustainability issues,” says CMS’s Till. “If a retailer promotes sustainability as one of its core beliefs, it will attract consumers sharing the same beliefs. When consumers trust the retailer to be environmentally conscious, the consumer doesn’t have to make purchasing decisions based on packaging because the retailer has already worked to offer the most responsible packaging option for them.”

Development of a logo or indicator to help customers quickly identify a sustainable item is a productive option. “We encourage our customers to emboss or label their packaging as environmentally friendly,” says InnoWare’s Sjolund. “This helps consumers understand the package is from a sustainable resource. The logo can be placed on the deli menu or next to product signage in the deli case. Also, make the information available to customers through flyers, posters, case clings, etc. to help educate why sustainability is important to the deli and to the customers themselves.

“Our research has proven to us that consumers want sustainable, healthful and environmentally sound products,” she continues. “They’re willing to pay a little more if they believe they’re helping to support a better

environment, and operators should use packaging making it easier for consumers to make these choices. A clear/clear PLA clamshell resembling regular plastic does not, in itself, get the consumer’s attention. Tell the story by using packaging with a distinct color, an embossed lid, or by labeling, which makes its eco-friendliness stand out. Our Eco line of packaging features an earth-toned base that helps operators convey a green message to their end users.”

Customer outreach is another important component of any initiative. “Let customers know about your department’s or company’s commitment to green and sustainable practices,” advises Gordon Hanrahan’s Warrmouth. “If the store or department has special practices such as new low-energy refrigerated units, etc., tout those. Sustainability goes beyond recycling and involves several aspects, including packaging, sourcing and production. Deli operators need not focus only on their own sustainability efforts, but on those of the products they use and sell.”

Grass Point’s Pawlek advocates a blend of technology and tried-and-true methods to get the message out to consumers. “In-store demos have worked historically, but more progressive operators are using social media forums, flyers, and in-store ‘good-for-you’ food tours hosted by in-store dieticians or other health professions.” **DB**

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