

Will Foodservice LEED the Way to a Greener Planet

Unless you spent the entire last year stocking the walk-in, you've probably heard something about green buildings and hybrid cars and you've heard plenty about greenhouse gas emissions. It's true, we're in the midst of a new environmental revolution – green is the new black – and once again, we are endeavoring to reduce our impact on our natural environment. The last time we embraced environmentalism, we dramatically reduced the pollutants in our air and water and rescued many of our animal friends from extinction and now the stakes are even higher. Environmental success this time around will require all of us to make real and substantive changes to the way we live and do business. Interested?

WHERE WE'RE AT

After much debate, there is unanimous scientific agreement that we humans are causing “global climate change” by burning fossil fuels. The results of climate change include nasty side effects like mass extinctions, increased wildfires, rising sea levels, and the lack of snow on your favorite ski run. Of course those fossil fuels are the very energy resources that make our society so dynamic and allow us to cook over range tops instead of camp fires. Energy is here to stay, so the question is, “where is all that energy going and could we use it more wisely?” In California, about 18% of the total energy-use goes to commercial business – about the same amount we use to power our millions of homes. And, within that commercial sector, food service is by far the most energy intensive type of business. Our kitchens are real guzzlers! Here's an analogy: if the corner bank branch is equal to a cup of warm cocoa, then the corner quick service restaurant (about the same footprint) is equal to a triple espresso and a handful of chocolate covered coffee beans. Bottom line: food service is a leader when it comes to generating greenhouse gases. But, that's not all. The construction, maintenance and renovation of millions of square feet of commercial floor space has a massive influence on our environment from a standpoint of the energy used to create all that stuff as well as the chemical byproducts and waste stream that are part of the process. Isn't there a better way?

WHERE WE'RE GOING

Many people in the food service universe, from quick service chains to university food service directors and from architects and designers to equipment manufacturers have a sincere desire to “green” food service. Different people are trying different approaches but a unified green-building roadmap is what is really needed. That roadmap exists in the form of US Green Building Council (USGBC)

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. “LEED” is the new buzzword amongst the environmentally hip and you will earn the admiration of your peers if you can manage to work it into polite conversation. You'll be even cooler if you actually know what it means, so here's the 411 on LEED certification. The USGBC was formed 14 years ago to provide the architectural and building community with a concrete definition of what makes a “green building.” This definition includes comprehensive guidance on design and operation and offers proof that the building is truly “environmentally friendly” in the form of official LEED Certification. If a building rises above the basic level of certification it can be qualified as LEED Silver, Gold or even Platinum. The certification process is rigorous and requires the assistance of a LEED Accredited Professional (AP) along with some application fees. To date, most of the LEED certified buildings are larger institutional projects that have the technical and financial resources to meet the USGBC requirements as well as the political mandate to “go green or go home.” That model is great if you are the State of California, but what happens when Starbucks wants to go LEED? In fact, the USGBC has enlisted the help of the commercial retail sector, including food service operators like Starbucks and Chipotle, to create the LEED for Retail pilot program. LEED for Retail is an effort to recognize the differences between large office buildings and their smaller commercial cousins. It is also a path for “portfolio certification” which allows the certification of multiple sites based on the design of a single prototype. Hey, this all sounds great – is green food service a done deal? Not quite.

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

While LEED certification has existed for several years, there are only a very few LEED certified restaurants including one Starbucks in Oregon and the Wild Goose Restaurant at Lake Tahoe. These are joined by a few institutional dining buildings and two Whole Foods® Markets. All this is about to change as big players like Chipotle, Brinkers and McDonald's get involved in the process but the slim participation is a reminder that certification takes some planning and a focused effort. New restaurants or renovations fall under one of three LEED categories – new construction (NC), core and shell (CS), or commercial interior (CI). At the moment, this last category holds the most promise for the typical food service operator. Both the Starbucks and the Wild Goose were certified under LEED-CI. Anyone opening a restaurant in an existing building should review the LEED-CI requirements and give serious consideration to certification, if they feel they can earn the necessary credits. New freestanding restaurants would qualify under the LEED-NC for Retail pilot program. Environmentally friendly building materials, efficient lighting, water conservation, public transit, waste diversion, and “green power” are all subjects that you will need to become familiar with. The LEED-NC for Retail application guide, descriptions of the LEED categories and the checklists are all on the USGBC website at www.usgbc.org.

OUR FUTURE

All of these requirements may seem overwhelming and sound impossible but don't panic. The practice of green building is still in its infancy. The USGBC is evolving its concept of what makes a green restaurant even as our industry is waking to the need for LEED buildings. You have not been left behind - in fact, you now know more about green building than many of your colleagues! Somewhere in the not-too-distant past, restaurants lacked sanitation, refrigeration and ventilation systems that are totally standard to all modern kitchens. We figured out how to overcome the technical hurdles and we'd never go back. Somewhere in the near future, the standard restaurant will be a lot easier on our environment. We will figure that out too. We have no choice - think about it - all of the raw materials in the food service world come from the environment. And, we certainly can't allow global warming to continue – those kitchens are hot enough already!

These energy saving tips are offered by the Food Service Technology Center (FSTC), an unbiased food service resource center located in San Ramon, CA and funded by California utility ratepayers under the auspices of the California Public Utilities Commission. For more information on the FSTC and for our schedule of free energy efficiency seminars, please visit our website at www.fishnick.com.