

Restaurant brands hone in on an all-in approach to sustainability

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When it comes to integrating sustainability guidelines and policies into restaurant growth strategies, most restaurant brands are deferring to participation rather than leading with inspiration.

There is ample evidence of brand leaders embracing transformational green innovations, and broadly implementing eco-friendly steps into operations and marketing practices. Reduction of single-use plastics, increasing locally sourced menu ingredients, eco-friendly disposable packaging, composting, recycling...these aren't insignificant.

But what's missing is an all-in approach — the kind of seismic re-invention around real transformation and leadership that inspires change across the entire industry and leads to a “mainstreaming” of sustainability that motivates action and buy-in through the collective consumer consciousness.

But all in doesn't mean piecemeal, “check-the-box” green and eco-friendly adoption or claiming to be everything to everyone. All in refers to taking a stand by leveraging sustainability to drive a more consequential brand re-invention that stimulates long-term business growth, internal cultural engagement and permanent competitive differentiation.

In other words, all in means making a sustainability promise that is active and actionable. You either keep the promise or you don't. Choose believability and authenticity or create friction and doubt with your most engaged stakeholders.

I know this is a lot to ask — I've actually been there before. I know that championing and justifying any kind of unconventional pivot inside of an already tenuous revenue model in a complex, disrupted marketplace is a lot to ask of brand stakeholders.

But there is space here to stand out. And customers are craving this kind of leadership.

The Hartman Group's *Sustainability 2021: Environment and Society in Focus* report reveals that 44 per cent of consumers say they are willing to drastically change their lifestyles to live in a more sustainable way. That number more than doubles among core consumers (those consumers most engaged in the world of sustainability) — 93 per cent of core consumers say they are committed to taking different types of actions to make their lifestyles more environmentally friendly.

More than a quarter of consumers say they always or usually base their purchases on sustainability, an increase of 11 points over the last 14 years and up four points just from 2019. The bottom line: Authentic commitment with demonstrable progress, not greenwashing.

The Hartman Group's research makes a powerful case for companies to take action on a range of sustainability issues and to be open and honest about their practices.

Technomic addresses this in *Technomic's Take: What to Expect in Canada in 2021* and forecasts that the industry "taking a stronger stand" with a broader commitment to sustainability policies and practices that ebbed during the height of the pandemic.

"Although social and environmental progress paused when the pandemic hit, the degree to which these calls to action have become louder and more urgent means we'll see operators double down on efforts over the coming year."

These insights are incredibly valuable in identifying next steps for innovative and forward-thinking brands that want to go beyond piecemeal implementation of sustainability practices and re-invent their brand with a sustainability promise

Step 1. Solve a Problem and Take a Stand

This simply means go beyond making a commitment to sustainable policies and practices and mobilize your entire culture around a relevant and realistic problem to solve. This problem should be relevant in the sense that it is attached to your core purpose, specialization or competency and realistic enough that specific steps to solve the problem can be identified, solutions can be planned, goals can be set and progress can be measured and communicated.

Let's use food waste as an example. A conventional sustainability approach would be to elevate composting through operational channels. However, if we want to truly take a stand, and elevate our sustainability promise to consumers, we would approach this entirely differently. We would go all in. This could mean becoming an upcycling pioneer in the industry — diverting food waste into convertible ingredients to sell to food manufacturers or creating a menu entirely composed of imperfect ingredients that would normally be disposed of and wasted.

Step 2. Make it Matter, Connect Emotionally

The shared journey towards solving a problem should be a source of emotional connection with your brand stakeholders and begin to define important personal elements of your relationships with them. Each stakeholder is built a little differently however, and building out a sustainability promise will require cultivating a coalition of the most motivated and passionate stakeholders that are most likely to be inspired by your deeper commitment to solving a problem — a problem that matters to them. Remember, this isn't about participation; it's about inspiration.

Let's talk about eliminating single-use plastic in this example. Here's where I would start:

- invest in adopters: inviting the most passionate customers and internal team members to participate in the conversation
- unleash ambassadors: empowering brand advocates to share their ideas and experiences in their own networks
- activate influencers: test new ideas and innovations with those most likely to share
- enrich communities: build and participate in coalitions across industries

Step 3. Create a Culture of Exceeding Expectations

You and your team must lead this journey with consistency and determination and create a culture of exceeding expectations. This means often making decisions to elevate your commitment to sustainability above and beyond traditional growth measures.

A great example would be sourcing local ingredients. A commitment to buy local when possible would be a start. A promise to always have a separate locally sourced feature menu while creating a local artisan marketplace in your store sounds a lot more like a promise.

An authentic sustainable brand model, built into a sustainable growth strategy must absolutely exist and be defined by its commitment to fulfilling a promise to its most loyal and engaged stakeholders. You don't need to be perfect, but you do need to explore, establish and embody a shared vision.

Will this level of commitment pay off for your business? I'll let Josh Prigge, founder & CEO of Sustridge Sustainability Consulting, have the last word:

“Companies aren’t just doing good at the cost of profit, they’re actually doing well by doing good...We’re learning sustainability is not a fad. It’s no longer a niche or a nice to have...It’s becoming more and more clear that your company’s bottom line and growth potential is starting to depend on sustainability.”

By Brandon Poole. *Brandon Poole is the founder and facilitator of BrandGabs, a brand-building workshop that helps businesses and organizations struggling with uncertainty, disruption, and stagnancy. He can be reached at brandon@brandgabs.com*

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