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OFF-PREMISES INDUSTRY MUST CONFRONT PACKAGING WASTE



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The pandemic completely changed consumers' food shopping habits. More people ordered meal kits for home delivery or bought restaurant food for takeout and delivery. That has created a huge challenge for the industry – more consumer waste.

According to Frank Franciosi, executive director at the [U.S. Composting Council](#), food waste accounts for 35% of the material that goes into landfills in the United States. Besides taking up valuable landfill space, the rotting matter produces a significant amount of methane gas, a major contributor to climate change. An answer to reducing the trend is composting, which means clamshells, beverage cups and other food containers need to be made of compostable materials, so they can be processed at a compost facility.

“To keep organics out of the landfill, you can compost it,” Franciosi said. “It’s a win-win. You handle the material locally. You create jobs. You don’t generate methane. And you generate a finished product (compost) that can be used back in the soil.”

It is something that consumers, especially younger ones, are demanding, and the industry must adapt. A recent survey by Technomic found that the top consumer concern for takeout food packaging was the ability to keep food warm and cold. Not far behind, however, was eco-friendly packaging. Consumers do not want to see takeout and delivery food in Styrofoam or other non-degradable material. For example, a [Hartman Group](#) study found that 67% of consumers said they avoid products packaged in Styrofoam or other packaging that does not recycle or compost, and 83% of consumers are concerned about the amount of single-use plastic.

[World Centric](#) Resource Recovery Manager Erin Levine said composting is part of the solution. Composting is the natural process of decomposing leaves, manure, food waste and other organic material into fertilizer. Unlike recycling, where food waste contaminates the material, compost

facilities want food waste in compostable containers. Large, industrial composting facilities take tons of material and turn it into fertilizer for farmers.

Most food containers cannot be recycled, though, because they contain food waste. Take, for example, a pizza box. A normal pizza box cannot be recycled because it contains oil, cheese and other food waste. But a compostable pizza box can contain leftover food waste and make excellent material for a compost facility.

“With compostable containers, if it has some leftovers in it, the whole entire container can get placed into the compost bin,” said Levine. The material then will be shipped to a compost facility.

TARGETING LARGE FACILITIES

Levine said right now it is challenging in most states for individuals to compost takeout and other food containers. In California, a law took effect that requires municipalities and other governments that provide garbage service to collect organic matter separately. Residents are required to separate organic matter from garbage and recycling. The organic matter is transported to a composting facility.

Levine said a couple other states are starting to implement similar policies, but most states do not have regulations on disposing of organic material. She believes that in the short term the best way to reduce food waste is through large institutional facilities like hospitals, schools, sports stadiums and hotels. These organizations need to begin using compostable containers and collecting the material so it can be turned into compost.

“I talked to a hospital in Ohio yesterday that said that they had so much volume that they don’t want to pay the commercial hauler,” Levine said. “So they’re actually going to purchase their own equipment to digest the material on site. And then they’re going to be left with a finished alternative to fertilizer compost. And they’re going to be using it on their own campus. It’s kind of a cool closed-loop system.”

Franciosi used the example of a sports stadium. That is a closed area, and the organization can make sure all the containers are compostable. The compostable containers and food waste can be sent to a compost facility.

Franciosi knows the transition to more sustainable packaging materials and systems will be challenging, but he did give the food industry a lot of credit. Many in the industry are working to make packaging more sustainable and focusing on multi-use containers. He noticed that when he

first started to order meal kits a few years ago, they were packaged in Styrofoam. Now, they are boxed in cardboard and often, the cardboard is made from recycled material.

More work needs to be done, Franciosi said. Too much food waste and packaging end up in landfills.

“These companies need to look at how they do things and decided what is going to be reusable, what is going to be recyclable,” Franciosi said.

TOWARD A NATIONAL COMPOSTING POLICY

A big step would be a national policy on composting. Right now, not enough infrastructure exists to process 13.5 million tons of food waste produced in the United States each year, and each state permits composting facilities differently.

“There is not enough infrastructure in place in the U.S. to handle all of the food packaging,” Franciosi said.

A national policy could help the industry develop the infrastructure needed to process all the food waste. Last year, the [COMPOST Act](#) was introduced in the U.S. House. It sought funding to improve the composting infrastructure in the United States. That bill appears to have stalled in Congress, but another bill, the [Recycling and Composting Accountability Act](#), advanced out of committee in the Senate and has bipartisan support. The bill asks the EPA to study composting infrastructure in the United States and develop guidelines for enhancing recycling and composting. Delaware Sen. Tom Carper is the main sponsor of the bill and said the bill’s goal is “explore opportunities for implementing a national composting strategy.”

Franciosi said the federal government wants to cut food waste by 2030, but the FDA and the EPA have no plan. The bill would require the federal government to study the problem and develop a roadmap for fixing it. To develop a solution, farmers, food producers and composting companies need to be involved.

“Everybody needs to be involved in that decision-making process,” Franciosi said.

EDUCATION

Besides the legal avenues, both Levine and Franciosi said education is important. People often do not understand the difference between recyclable and compostable materials. They do not realize that a lot of food packaging cannot be recycled but is still viable as a compost material.

“Food residuals on a recycling container will contaminate the whole recycling stream,” Levine said. “You don’t want to see food scraps remaining in a recyclable container. A compostable container, if it has some leftovers in it, the whole entire container can get placed into the compost bin.”

Franciosi said education also must be done at the federal level so lawmakers realize that composting is an industrial process and needs universal regulation. The process of getting a license and operating a composting facility is not universal across the country, and that makes it very challenging for the industry.

He sees the food industry playing an important role in the entire conversation.

“I think food packaging does have a place in composting,” Franciosi said. “But there are a lot of issues with contamination and identification of those products. It really comes down to education. We need a national awareness campaign on labeling and identification.”

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