

Defining Food with Purpose

Executive Summary

11/19/19

Kiana Mays

In a fast-paced world, Americans enjoy restaurants as a convenient, time-saving alternative to cooking at home. Restaurants also serve as spaces for people to take a break from their hectic schedules and enjoy food in a comfortable environment. While restaurants provide an important value to American society, they also contribute greatly to global sustainability problems. Fast-food and fast-casual establishments in the US overwhelmingly contribute to plastic pollution, diet-related health problems, food waste, and unsustainable agricultural practices. Health food restaurants typically cater to wealthier demographics, resulting in an accessibility issue for people of lower-income levels. Even restaurant owners that want to make their operations more sustainable face obstacles that may deter them from taking the first steps. The restaurant industry is highly competitive, with 80 percent of restaurants failing within the first five years. Additionally, many people perceive sustainability as being more expensive, which might make restaurant owners fearful of taking on sustainability initiatives, as they may perceive them as a risk to their business.

Even with overarching problems in the restaurant industry, there is no one-size-fits all solution. For instance, a fine dining establishment would have to take a vastly different approach from a fast food restaurant. Even two different fast-casual restaurants will have a unique set of circumstances that will require different strategies for taking on sustainability initiatives. Even though general frameworks and rating systems for restaurant sustainability exist, a restaurant's individual challenges must be addressed on a case-by-case basis. For this reason, I chose to work directly with a restaurant in Tempe called the Bodhi, helping them develop and advance their sustainability goals.

When I first met with the owners, I learned that they knew what sustainability was and why it is important in a broader sense, but did not have the tools to address it in a strategic way. The restaurant's mission is to deliver healthy, affordable food, catered to its customers' specific health needs. When developing the goals of the project, we wanted to focus on highlighting the connection between caring for one's inner health and outer sustainability. This became the basis of the community engagement aspect of the project. The Bodhi is a young establishment, having only been open for about a year now, so it was important that this consultancy supported the growth of the business, and that the sustainability initiatives could be replicated for future locations.

Following our initial meeting, we expanded on these ideas and created two overarching goals. These goals were to 1) decrease landfill waste in the restaurant by 90 percent, and 2) create a 5-year sustainable business plan. Our main intervention point with the landfill diversion goal was to design a user-friendly waste stream for back-of-house and front-of-house that included composting, recycling, and landfill receptacles. For the 5-year plan, I wanted to provide recommendations that the Bodhi could implement immediately, as well as further down the line, as the company grows, so I organized the plan by short-, mid-, and long-term initiatives.

To meet the project goals, several research methods were employed. I researched an assortment of sustainable restaurant rating systems, case studies, and frameworks, which helped shape the recommendations for the 5-year plan and inform the variables of the following analyses. A market analysis was conducted to better understand the Bodhi's position from a brand standpoint and to see how sustainability could serve as a tool to differentiate their company from the competition. I also conducted a current state analysis for the Bodhi's supply chain, as well as audits of the Bodhi's current waste stream and building portfolio. These analyses helped develop KPI's for energy efficiency, cost-savings, local procurement, and waste reduction goals.

Based on the findings from the waste stream audit, I came up with incremental solutions that would achieve a 90% landfill diversion by 2025. From the findings of the energy audit, I identified energy solutions that would immediately save the Bodhi money on their energy bills, as well as best practices and recommendations for lowering energy usage in the long-term. We met our project goal of creating a 5-year sustainable business plan, and I have set the Bodhi up to implement a composting program easily if they want to obtain their goal of 90% landfill diversion in the restaurant. While we had a goal of implementing the composting waste stream, we learned that it required a lot more financial planning and research which set us back. However, with the goal of creating the 5-year sustainable business plan met, I feel confident that the Bodhi has the tools and resources it needs to grow sustainably.