

Waste Management as a Core Business Strategy at Baldor

By Dana Mitchell

Talking to Thomas McQuillan, head of sustainability at the East Coast food distributor heavyweight Baldor, will leave you feeling inspired and hopeful for the future of food. After selling his own food distribution company two years ago, Thomas joined Baldor to work on special projects for the distributor's president.

"I've lived a life of sustainability – but have not always been great at it," Thomas said. "As a concept, it is like breathing. It's hard to imagine a business where you don't protect the assets as much as possible." Yet, as we live in a consumer culture increasingly dependent on convenience and speed in food delivery, distributors and producers alike are being pushed to innovate in order to protect our resources.

Much of the recent focus in the food and beverage industry has been on the production phase of the food supply: what our food is grown from (e.g. seed contents and GMOs), what our food is grown in (e.g. organics, pesticides) or how our food is grown (e.g. animal welfare, monoculture). Baldor has emerged as a pioneer in the industry due to its forward-thinking SparCs program, which successfully diverts 100% of its organic food waste from its pre-cut produce program, Fresh Cuts, to other productive uses. Through this program, Baldor has been able to tackle waste from another segment of the supply chain – post-production waste –which occurs from making foods more convenient and ready-to-eat.

Through the SparCs program, Thomas has led Baldor to identify valuable uses for "wasted" food and to innovate in the face of constraint. Produce scraps are being re-purposed for both human and animal consumption; such as carrot peels for carrot peel cookies. Through SparCs, 150,000 pounds of produce is diverted from landfill every week. Many of these solutions have also allowed Baldor to cut post-production costs: for example, it costs 33% less to haul produce scraps to a chicken feed company than to landfill.

Thomas noted that a core strategy for accomplishing eradication of pre-cut produce waste is seeking and developing strong, symbiotic partnerships with the vendors, retailers, growers and manufacturers who are dependent on fresh produce in their operation.

In addition to working with Blue Hill and Haven's Kitchen in Manhattan, Baldor also works with MISFIT Juicery, a juice company that cold-presses juices of which 70-80% come from recovered fruits and vegetables. "Baldor has been an amazing partner to us. Thomas McQuillan has made Baldor a leader in sustainability and we are inspired by their initiatives," said Ann Yang, MISFIT Juicery's co-founder. Forming a community of food and beverage companies focused on creating shared value will be crucial to the food waste story in the coming years.

Now that SparCs has proven successful, what's next for Baldor? Thomas listed three goals:

- Communicating the need to streamline the plastic used when packaging produce so that the end user can accumulate and recycle it
- Investigating opportunities to eliminate waxed cardboard from packaging, as it is not recyclable and adds billions of pounds of landfill waste

- Adding chef partners who will utilize SparCs to create delicious and nutritious recipes for human consumption

In addition to SparCs, Thomas has a number of projects in the works, including increasing the number of solar panels used on their production sites and implementing more efficient routing systems for food and produce deliveries. Thomas also says he would like to see Baldor grow less dependent on the electrical grid by migrating their fleet of pallet jacks to hydrogen-powered fuel cell technologies.

When Thomas lived in Italy in the 90s, he walked to the market to purchase fresh food every day. Because of this habit, he had no need a refrigerator — so he simply unplugged it. He notes that the kinds of food we typically put in the fridge — such as doggie bags of food from restaurants —represent an “excuse” to buy more than we need to or to not utilize the food we have purchased fast enough. “A lot of times you don’t realize you’re creating the waste... and that it’s in your control to not create it.”

The fight against food waste a matter of prioritization. If restaurants and consumers put a premium on reducing food purchased to only what is needed, Thomas says the mass food production industry as well as the waste industry could see some big changes. At the end of the day, it comes down to every decision made in the check-out line or while ordering at restaurants. For Thomas, the biggest obstacle in tackling food waste beyond operational alterations is “changing cultural norms around what used to be [considered] waste.” Thanks to restaurants and food companies increasingly joining the fight against food waste, he believes that progress will continue.