

Proactive Waste Management Solutions: Implementing reusable and biodegradable food packaging at food festivals

Summary of the Case

Food festivals are major tourist attraction that creates unique social settings in which consumers can taste, experience, and learn about diverse cuisines and cultures. While these festivals drive tourism in their host communities, they can also have a lingering negative environmental impact. Sustainability initiatives for managing festivals have received increasing attention in recent years as festival attendees have become more aware of the impact their behavioral has on the environment. Discarded food packaging is a major contributor to waste in a food festival setting, and finding a waste management solution for short-term events can be a challenge for festival planners.

Some examples of waste generated by festivals include food, plastic cutlery, plastic bottles, paper napkins, paper plates, and foam cups. The waste eventually finds its way into landfills or is incinerated because the majority of it cannot be recycled. Unfortunately, these waste management practices are fairly common because industrial dishwashers are not always available to stallholders at food festivals, further complicating the possibility of implementing a reusable tableware program.

As a result, many festivals have tried to implement alternative waste management solutions that address food packaging waste through reusable tableware programs. Programs which employ a deposit-refund system are proving to be both successful and cost-effective. In addition, some festival planners are implementing biodegradable and compostable (B&C) food packaging options. While the B&C options tend to cost more than the polystyrene or polypropylene products, festival planners who use these products can create a competitive business advantage by marketing their event as “green.” Proactive waste management solutions have excellent potential to create a cost benefit and competitive advantage for food festivals.

Target Audience

The case study discusses the role that festival planners, vendors, local governments, and attendees all play in managing waste at food festivals. The target audience for this case study is broad and diverse, as the issue of sustainability is widespread across the hospitality industry; therefore, this case study has the potential to be useful to event planners, festival stakeholders, and restaurants interested in becoming “greener;” students, volunteers, vendors, and workers attending or coordinating a food festival; venue owners who host food festivals; and anyone with a vested interest in food festival waste management. The target audience includes people of all demographics who can read at or above a high school level.

Teaching Objectives

This case study should be presented by a teacher with previous experience in event management, project management, business, or food tourism. Based on the content provided in this case study, the teaching objectives include:

- investigation of current sustainability practices in the hospitality industry, focusing on waste management practices at food festivals
- understanding the importance of sustainable practices in food tourism
- discussion of the benefits and methods of marketing a food festival as a “green event”
- understanding the pros and cons of implementing alternative food packaging options

Learning Outcomes

Students may be particularly interested in this case study if they have previously attended, volunteered, or worked at a food festival or other festival-type event. The topics presented in this case study are also relevant to anyone interested in sustainability, tourism, food service, hospitality, or event management. At the conclusion of the lesson, students will be able to:

- compare the differences between sustainable and traditional waste management practices at a festival
- evaluate why old practices need to be changed, including cost, current trends, environmental health, etc.
- analyze methods of waste management and sustainability that can be implemented at festivals
- list solutions to reduce overall waste at food festivals

Recommended Teaching Approach

This case study can be taught in three different components. The teacher should first briefly provide examples and background of food festivals and waste practices. For example, the teacher could present recent media coverage from the Glastonbury Festival in England. The festival received negative press in 2015 due to negligent waste management practices, which forced festival organizers to implement better recycling programs (Gillett, 2017). The teacher can then ask students to describe their personal experience with waste at a food festival or similar event and brainstorm with the class on ways to address those issues.

The second teaching component should address food packaging alternatives discussed in the case study. The instructor should first provide information about reusable tableware programs, such as the program implemented at the Whole Earth Festival and provide physical

examples of biodegradable and compostable food packaging options. This material will serve as an effective visual to increase students' understanding of developments in compostable technology. The teacher can provide a demonstration of how materials break down or create a game by having students roleplay the waste/recycle separation process necessary at both types of food festivals – traditional and green.

In the final teaching component, the instructor should address the case study's suggestions for implementation. Students should be grouped into small teams and given an opportunity to discuss the case study for at least 15 minutes. Students should discuss whether or not they would implement any of the alternative waste management solutions listed in the case study if they were planning a food festival. After the discussion, students should be given an opportunity to share their ideas with class. When the instructor feels that students have a firm understanding of the content, an essay or worksheet that addresses the following questions can be assigned. Students may also work in groups to develop a presentation that answers the following questions.

- Describe any personal experience you have had with waste left behind at a festival or at a festival type event. (Give example – overflowing trashcans at an amusement park, odors at a fair, etc.).
- Do you think food festivals should implement more sustainable waste management programs? Why or why not? List pros and cons.
- Do you think food festival attendees would be willing to participate in green initiatives at food festivals if there was an additional cost? Explain your reasoning.
- If you were a festival planner, would you prefer to use reusable dishware or biodegradable and compostable food packaging? Provide justification for your choice.
- What other sustainable practices could festival planners employ at food festivals? These practices could address waste management, water management, food and beverage sales, registration, entertainment, etc.
- Additional student activities would require students, working in teams, to produce a mock festival waste management plan which would be presented to a city compliance officer or to develop an event planner check-list outlining the steps required to host a green festival.

Internal Issues

Alternative waste management programs require extensive time for implementation. Vendors who have been packaging their products the same way for years may not feel inclined to make the switch to new and more expensive packaging. The additional cost required for an alternative food packaging solution may spark a negative reaction in various stakeholders. Thus, it is crucial that festival planners communicate the opportunity to generate additional revenue from marketing the festival as a “green event.”

Vendors will also need time to learn how to use reusable dishware or B&C packaging. Kitchen operation and menu items may need adjustment to fit the new packaging. For example, B&C packaging can withstand a certain amount of weight before the material collapses, which may require vendors to adjust serving sizes. This can create additional problems for vendors, which could in turn make them less receptive to new sustainable initiatives. Festival planners will need to communicate the benefits of sustainability to vendors, attendees, and other stakeholders.

External Issues

Sustainability requires significant collaboration between key stakeholders, festival planners, local governments, and attendees; however, these efforts are meaningless if attendees and hosting communities do not find value in sustainability efforts. Regardless of how hard festival planners work to create effective waste management solutions, sustainability efforts are only as meaningful as consumers allow them to be. Festival planners must communicate the benefits of green events to attendees in pre-event marketing communications.

Local municipalities, federal governments, and international organizations need to create more resources to help festival planners. Many event organizers do not have an extensive knowledge of sustainable practices and would greatly benefit from sustainability guidelines, regulations, and certifications. While it is the festival planner's responsibility to create waste management solutions, the issue of sustainability is ultimately the responsibility of the government. Festival organizers are more effective when they are supported by local municipalities.

Additional Readings and Supplemental Videos

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