



Peter Backman

Peter Backman, Managing Director of foodservice consultants Horizons, says we must commit to sustainability sooner than we think...

FOOTPRINT COMMENT

Will sustainability survive the slump?

While the issue of sustainability is likely to grow in significance for the hospitality sector over the next 10 years, it is currently further down the 'to do' list for UK businesses than most environmentalists, lobby groups, and indeed the government would want. And, given the economic climate, that's not likely to change significantly.

We have now reached a time when everyone needs to start considering sustainability - ensuring our actions have less impact on ecological systems and the depleting reserves of fossil fuels.

Despite the fact that other nations such as China and India contribute to the problem without apparently trying to solve it, the UK is seemingly beginning to develop a global conscience.

But it is taking time.

The government's aim to reduce carbon emissions has so far failed - emissions are 2.2% higher than they were in 1997 and traffic on the road continues to rise. Environmentalists and lobby groups are now hoping that the government's recent Climate Change Bill will go some way towards improving the UK's record and put Britain on the path towards becoming a low-carbon economy, with the legally binding targets that this new legislation contains.

Broadly, a business is considered sustainable if it has adapted its practices to make better use of renewable resources and holds itself accountable for the environmental and human rights impacts of

its activities. Many of the larger hospitality operators are beginning to incorporate sustainability into their corporate culture. And with good advice available through various trade organisations, smaller hospitality businesses are also showing a willingness to adopt greener principles by reducing their carbon footprint, buying local food when possible, improving their energy efficiency and recycling their waste. Admittedly it has not been purely altruistic principles that have been behind this. Often it is the desire to keep up with competitors, as well as pressure from shareholders or financial backers and, to a lesser extent, customers. It escapes no one's notice that being environmentally aware makes good PR sense too. But the most compelling pressure to incorporate sustainability comes from the fact that it makes financial sense to become more energy efficient and produce less waste. Waste disposal, gas and electricity prices have risen so steeply that installing a unit that can generate your own power could pay for itself in as little as five years. Something as simple as installing energy efficient light bulbs that last five times as long as conventional ones not only saves money, but saves staff time in replacing them.

Only time will tell whether environmental concerns are merely a passing fad or whether they are here to stay. Corporate social responsibility was once the buzz phrase for large companies, now that has fallen by the wayside - will sustainability go the same way? Certainly many companies

are making great strides with short-term simple changes - insulation, energy efficient kitchen equipment, cutting down on paper usage, buying locally. But it's the long-term investments that are likely to be shelved during a period of economic uncertainty. But if we don't pay attention to sustainability, the world will change irrevocably. We are already facing a situation where global warming and melting ice sheets are becoming a reality. It is an alarming thought that if developing countries start to use the same level of resources as the US it will take six planet Earths to supply their needs. Clearly this is not sustainable.

In a UK economy arguably on the brink of recession with operators suffering the triple whammy of a slowdown in consumer spending, high food inflation and increasing energy bills, incorporating sustainable practice may not be top of the agenda. But operators must take a long-term view. The economy will improve and margins will return to more healthy levels, but the issue of sustainability will not go away. While the initial outlay for installing sustainable operations can be high - there is a pay back. It is those companies that have continued to invest in sustainability that will be well placed when the market does recover.

A long-term view must be taken - not only for the benefit of businesses, but for the global environment too.

www.horizonsforsuccess.com