

Green Space: Scaling Back Overproduction

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How Swedish Medical Center Reduced Its Waste Size



A Swedish Medical Ctr. cook uses the ValuWaste scale to measure the value of product being thrown away.

When you have to feed a lot of people, you tend to generate a lot of wasted food. That's the intractable logic of volume feeding operations and has been since the birth of the onsite dining industry. To do otherwise, except in some limited, highly controlled circumstances, is to risk leaving some diners hungry.

At Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, however, a pilot program sponsored by Seattle Public Utilities has brought an innovative technology solution to the kitchen that helps fine-tune the menu to reduce waste.

The result: an overall 19-percent reduction in solid waste at the pilot site, First Hill, a large hospital operation with 697 beds and four onsite retail caf  outlets. Swedish was so happy with the results that it committed to investing \$25,000 to implement the system at its two other campuses, Ballard and Cherry Hill.

The core of the initiative is a kitchen waste management system whose components include a scale, attached touch-screen terminal and specialized software. It lets kitchen staff quickly measure the amount of waste generated in the kitchen from overproduction, inefficient trim yields, spoilage and so forth while the software application consolidates the waste data generated by the scale.

When kitchen staff gets ready to remove waste from the kitchen, they first weigh it on the scale. The type of food (as well as the container it's held in) is entered on the terminal, and the unit measures and logs it.

The accumulated data is then used to generate a variety of reports that allow Executive Chef Eric Eisenberg to calibrate menus and organize production operations to reduce inefficiencies (as a bonus, the system also tabulates how much overproduction is actually donated to area hunger agencies).

Eisenberg says the system identifies inefficiencies not readily apparent otherwise. In a big operation like this, you're not as aware of what you waste because everything broken down in different areas. It also makes staff more aware of waste.

For example, he cites a breakfast cook who reduced the amount of leftover generated from full pans to almost zero when the system was implemented. When the scale briefly went down, the overproduction temporarily resumed.

Among operational improvements:

- changing soup production from full scratch to purchasing pre-portioned varieties. The result: a 65% reduction in waste.
- passing authority for purchasing bakery goods from the purchasing department to the sous chef, who has a better handle on usage. The result: a 29% reduction in waste.
- going from bulk production early in the day to batch production at each meal period for patient meal side dishes and sauces. The result: a 46% reduction in waste.

Use of the system also prompted a change in the retail cafes, from a cycle menu approach to a food court one with standard concepts and more set menus. Customers still get the variety they want but production can better track actual demand.

The benefits are not just the dollars saved or even the ecological impact, Eisenberg stresses, but a boost in morale because production crews no longer have to see so much of the fruits of their labor being thrown away.

I was very skeptical, he admits. I thought it would be cumbersome and provide little valuable information, but it's totally the opposite. I look forward to reviewing the data every week. It takes a lot of the work out of finding areas where we can do things better.