

TAKING A HARD LOOK AT COSTS, LABOR, SAFETY: FOODSERVICE DISPOSABLES

Deciding how much of your operation can use disposables involves a complex belonging act in which a variety of factors both in and out of your control – from environment concerns, hauling charges, and labor costs to equipment maintenance, style of service and employee training – must be carefully weighed.

However, with sanitation taking more of the foodservice spotlight it has become a weightier factor in the decision-making process operators around the industry agree.

“There is a sanitation benefit to using foodservice disposables, with the caveat that they are properly stored and handled once they are in the foodservice facility,” says Michael Pells, a spokesperson for the Arlington, VA-based Foodservice & Packaging Institute Inc. (FPI), the trade association for manufacturers, raw material and machinery suppliers, and distributors of foodservice disposable products.

The latest revision of the IDA’s Food Code, Pells point out, acknowledges the need for disposables to preserve proper sanitation in situations where sanitization and dishwashing facilities are unavailable.

“That might seem like an obvious, ‘No-kidding’ thing, but you’d be surprised. That’s kind of been our ‘motherhood’ issue here since the institute was founded in 1988”.

Charles Felix, MPH, of Leesburg, VA-based Charles Felix Associate, says disposables “have certainly been proven to be more sanitary than the reusables. When bacteria counts have been done on both, disposables are practically sterile and the others not”.

He cites the difficulty many operations are having today finding personnel to man the dishwashers and the high turnover in that

type of job. “It’s extremely difficult to train a person in proper dish handling and that’s where the problem lies; the excessive handling of the dishes. There is also some question about whether most dishwashers are sanitizing the dishes properly”.

Deleting dishwashing, Helen Deen, fed at 50-bed Presbyterian Hospital in Winnabore TX estimates that she uses about 10% disposables – all in the cafeteria- but that the number will soon rise to 60%. “We’re gradually using more than what we used to basically to keep from replacing capital purchases on dishes”.

Deen says she agrees that disposables help increase the level of sanitation. In fact, a pair of affiliated hospitals, the Presbyterian Hospitals in Dallas and Plano, TX both use 100% disposables in their cafeteria.

Henrietta Moore, dir., of the office of food service for the Detroit Public Schools, also uses a lot of disposables even for her extensive catering operation.

“We don’t have very many dishwashers in my system. We’ve taken the dishrooms and converted them to store rooms and everything else”. The decision to remove them, which was made several years ago by Moore’s predecessor, was “almost certainly” based on what she calls “sanitation reasons”.

Another reason for favoring disposables is the fact that “nothing is than looking at all dishware that has dried egg on it, or a plate that has dried food, or a spotted glass.

The cost factor Still:”There’s no such thing as free lunch. Disposables are expensive and when markets go south, or if the petroleum industry likes it’s prices, you pay the price for it”.

Felix, who also serves as FPI’s public health consultant, says it is a mistake to assume that a warewasher is properly sanitizing dishes. “Survey’s have shown that nearly half of them are not really sanitizing the dishes the way they’re supposed to be”.

Felix cites a comparative study of disposable and reusable cups, plates, and flatware conducted several years ago by FPI in Fairfax, VA (with the cooperation of the Fairfax Country Health Department).

Test findings Conducted at 21 foodservice operations including hospitals, nursing homes, a children's daycare center, a secondary school, motels and restaurants it revealed that the probability of microbial contamination was 50% greater with reusables.

- 15% of the reusable items had microbiological counts that exceeded the maximum recommended levels of 100 colonies per utensil.
- E.coli was detected on reusable utensils in one-third of test sites.
- The average total plate count for disposable items was two colonies per item; for reusables the mean was 410.
- According to FPI, sanitation inspection indicated that improper maintenance of dishwashing equipment, increased handling of reusables and poor storage practices probably accounted for the difference in microbiological quality.
- "You also have to spend more time with the employee, who's got to do things according to Hoyle, and that takes more time. The machine that also got to operate at the right temperature which costs more money".

New emphasis Felix also points out in one of his company's publications that the Food Code places "greater emphasis on warewashing than has any previous code". One reason is its emphasis on risk assessment as the basis for regulation. Improperly sanitized utensils have been identified as a major cause of foodborne illness.

The Code's Annex 4 indicates in several passages that reusables and warewashing systems must be maintained carefully-dishware free of cracks, chips, pits, and other imperfections and dishwashers well maintained and using the proper temperature of water and concentration of chemical sanitizer's-as a preventive measure against foodborne illness.

As Felix sees it, the Code "makes no distinction between food preparation and food-serving utensils; if the utensils have not been properly cleaned and sanitized, they are (pro facto) a hazard to public health and foodservice disposables should be used in their stand".

Moore says she has no trouble believing that close to half of dishwashers are doing less than satisfactory job of sanitizing dishes. "Dishwashers require human beings. You have to train that person to do it, and let's face it, it's not one of the most glamorous jobs in a kitchen. But it is one of the most important jobs in a food preparation setting".

When forced to work shorthanded, Dean often opts to "delete some of the things the dishwasher normally does. One of the things we would be washing so many dishes. It takes time not only for someone to wash them for someone to put them away. In our facility we don't let the same person who washes and handles dirty dishes put away. In our facility we don't let the same person who washes and handles dirty dishes put away clean dishes. And so it kind of unties two people if we use

disposables, which is one of the reasons I'm looking at using more of them".

Green hearing: The weight of arguments against disposables comes from claims that they add to environmental problems.

"There has been a push in the past decade when the whole environmental issue urged in the late '80s to go 'green' and push toward using more reusable ware," says Pells. "We felt that was kind of a red hearing; that once you balanced out the impact of the disposables in terms of solid waste, or the water and energy it took to wash dishes, you were really coming out with no pronounced environmental advantage".

Essential elements While Pells admits he would love to be able to make the statement that disposables are less expensive, he points out that "it comes down to 'it depends'. On volume, on the local situation. A few years ago there was a concern about water shortages, the scarcity of resources. Something like that would drive costs. We can't make that blanket statement due to so many local conditions like wages and the availability of labor".

by Howard Riell