What's in your garbage?

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Sustainability Desk

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At one time, waste may have been a positive sign of your business' economic activity and indicative of the fatter profit margins of the past. Now, what you discard as waste is considered a good snapshot of the level of inefficiency at your business. An example of this thinking comes from some of the largest firms in the Fortune 500 who have made it a goal to achieve zero waste.

Yes, zero waste. This may sound impossible, but getting close to that level is within reach for most businesses. Obviously, getting there is not an overnight process; but with a rigorous review of how much waste your business generates and then a persistent collaborative effort to reduce the volumes, you too will be able to achieve high diversion rates.

The first step is to perform an accounting of the volumes, types and sources of discards and where it's all going. This can take a little investigative work to track everything down and once completed, you may be surprised by the sheer volume and variety of discarded materials that need to be managed.

The second step is learning the characterization of what is in your discard stream by performing a physical audit, otherwise known as a "dumpster dive." For recyclable materials this is straightforward if they are separated by commodity types. For garbage or mixed recyclables, this requires a hands-on manual sort and measuring. As onerous and unpleasant as this may sound, with the appropriate safety gear, working space and sorting plan, a dumpster dive can usually be performed pretty quickly and without much drama.

With a well executed physical audit, the results will:

- Show you what part of your business is generating what type of waste and how much of it.
- Enable you to benchmark your performance.
- Allow you to create viable goals for improvement.

And, most importantly, an audit will help you create a roadmap to improve the way you manage discards.

The roadmap you develop should initially target materials which have a health or environmental risk. Commonly, these would include dry cell batteries, fluorescent lamps, electronic waste and other hazardous or toxic chemicals. Recycling these materials is very easy and your county or city recycling coordinator can provide a directory for reuse and recycling options.

After managing the more hazardous materials, the specific waste characterization, on-site storage capability, and your suppliers, will define the next step. Though we are all familiar with recycling service providers that will come pick up your materials (for a fee), this may not be the best system for managing all of your waste streams. Instead, consider the following strategies:

- Source reduction. Smarter purchasing, smarter design, smarter manufacturing and smarter working processes all take time to make an impact in reducing your waste stream. Now is the time to start.
- Purchasing equipment to turn a waste stream into a revenue stream. This could include an inexpensive baler for managing corrugated cardboard or plastic films.
- If your business generates pallets, dedicate a loading bay for a trailer for a pallet recycler.
- Use suppliers to backhaul recyclable materials.
- Storage of low volume, but high value waste streams (e.g., non-ferrous metals) until you accumulate marketable volumes.
- If only very low volumes of recyclable materials are generated, consider occasional deliveries to free drop-off sites.

After working through these alternative waste management strategies, any remaining recyclable materials are candidates for collection by a recycling collection service provider. Since you performed a physical waste audit, you have good data on what your business generates and are now in a better position to negotiate a service level appropriate to your needs.

Overall, effective management of waste streams can be complex, but it needn’t be overwhelming or even that difficult. Having good data on what your business generates is the key to making smart decisions and achieving solid results. For most businesses, a 50 percent diversion rate should be easy; many types of businesses can reach higher rates without much additional effort. Close to 100 percent diversion takes effort, but if some Fortune 500 firms are a guide, it can be accomplished.

The U.S. Green Building Council is a coalition of leaders from across the building industry working to promote environmentally responsible, profitable and healthy places to live and work. The West Michigan Chapter provides and develops leadership through affiliations and education at all levels. Please send comments and column proposals to chuck.otto1@gmail.com .

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