

Setting Out Bait

In the last issue, this column discussed opportunities for making use of non-burn technologies for extracting energy and producing marketable products from the organic portion of the waste stream. I could go on and on about the importance of turning loose our incredible scientific and technological capabilities to develop and commercialize efficient, environmentally superior, and cost-effective methods of transforming and/or disposing of wastes...but it'd be like beating a pretty tired horse to death at this juncture. To begin with, you've probably considered that we're already doing a good job with waste as it is. The costs are pretty well under control with plenty of opportunities for gaining increased efficiencies to keep things that way. The school solution for the situation in which we find ourselves is to consider that if and when the need arises to treat waste in a substantially different way from what we do now, we can always make the changes then. In short, why create unnecessary problems for ourselves until absolutely necessary?

Now or Never

I can think of two important reasons to break with the past and look for ways to attract new technological solutions, one--which I will mention only in passing and come back to at some later date--is that to a fairly great extent the focus of our approach to waste management ignores the broader vision of what it takes to make substantial reductions in our insult to the environment. While one can argue that overall the waste industry is putting forth a good faith effort, one would have to be hard pressed to prevail with the suggestion that the results we see are of the same order of magnitude as the needs. Putting it another way, it's getting hard to ignore the fact that the system needs overhaul and that it's going to take more than more money and some patchwork technological wizardry to do the job.

For now I'd like to propose another reason for us to grapple technological innovation into our mix of waste management practices, though its relevance to the problem may appear to be less obvious at the outset. It's an area of concern many of us are already feeling and one that may actually turn out to have greater consequences from the standpoint of our ability to respond to long term needs and capabilities. It has to do with our ability to attract the right people into the waste management field, a situation that I am going to suggest has everything to do with the degree to which we and our industry are perceived as being at or near the cutting edge of technology.

I propose to you that if we are not willing to encourage innovation and offer opportunities for people of skill and vision to put their talents to use in finding solutions to the most crucial of challenges we face--i.e. the complexities of balancing humankind's ever-increasing demands for goods and services with our ability to provide them in a sustainable manner--we will find it impossible to recruit the talent necessary accomplish the task, or even to maintain the capabilities we have today. In truth, we may find ourselves fighting a losing battle in the competition for mediocrity, from a talent pool that, relative to the burgeoning technological needs of our society, is actually shrinking. It's not enough for us so say that we cannot allow this to happen, we have to do something right now. And at a fundamental level, that something involves the belief that we will provide the very gifted entrants to our field of endeavor the means to make full use of their talents with a solid chance of success. This will not happen with a business-as-usual approach. If we want top talent, we're going to have to set out the best technological raw meat as bait.

How hard is this? Very hard since the very notion of major change is tough to stomach in its own right. Add to this such matters as increased costs and uncertainty of results, and you're looking at an array of challenges strong enough to test the faith of the most zealous saint. Yet if we cling to the status quo I believe we might just as well hang out a sign that says, "Those committed to achieving success need not apply."