

How Restaurants Can Better Manage Their Trash and Waste

By Eric Faber, Founder & CEO of U.S. Restaurant Consultants August 2024

Waste management isn't glamorous, but it is one of the most controllable, cost-impacting, and operationally overlooked areas in the restaurant business. From food scraps and single-use packaging to cardboard, fryer oil, and mixed recyclables, most restaurants are leaking money and efficiency through their dumpsters without realizing it.

Better trash and waste practices don't just reduce costs—they improve sanitation, prevent pests, streamline labor, and support brand sustainability goals. Here's how restaurants can take control.

1. Conduct a Waste Audit: Know What You're Throwing Away

Before you can improve, you must understand your baseline.

A simple weekly waste audit can reveal:

- How much food waste is coming from prep vs. line scraps vs. customer plates
- How often cardboard is being broken down correctly
- How many half-full trash bags are being tossed due to poor training
- Contamination in recycle or compost bins
- Excessive single-use product usage (napkins, ramekins, to-go containers)

Restaurants are often shocked to discover how much they're paying for air—the labor to take out bags that aren't full, plus increased pickup frequency.

2. Train Staff on Proper Sorting and Bag Usage

Consistent training solves 80% of waste problems.

Focus training on:

- **Full bag policy:** no bag goes out until it's at least 75% full
- **Bag sizes:** smaller bags in restrooms, larger bags in BOH—no cross-use
- **Cardboard protocol:** break down every box, no exceptions
- **Food waste vs. trash:** keep wet waste separate when possible to avoid leaking bags that cause double-handling
- **Liner selection:** using the correct liner strength saves money and prevents rips

A trained team produces fewer trips to the dumpster, cleaner floors, and fewer pests.

3. Optimize Dumpster Size, Placement, and Pickup Frequency

Most restaurants pay for dumpsters that are either too small, too large, or picked up too often.

Evaluate:

- **Does your pickup schedule match your needs?** (Most can reduce pickups once waste is compacted and optimized.)
- **Is the dumpster too far from the back door?**
Long walks = wasted labor and increased risk of spills.
- **Are you using a compactor when you should be?**
High-volume operations (casual dining, QSR, hotels) often see ROI in months.

Location alone can save hundreds of labor hours per year if staff can access the dumpster quickly and safely.

4. Reduce Food Waste Through Smarter Prep & Inventory

Food waste is a direct cost to your P&L. Common contributors:

- Over-prepping due to inaccurate PAR levels
- Poor FIFO rotation
- Oversized portions
- Recipes that create unnecessary trim or product scraps

Solutions include:

- **Dynamic PAR sheets** based on sales trends
- **Knife skills training** to reduce yield loss
- **Portion control tools** (spoodles, scales, pre-portioned mise cups)
- **Menu engineering** to eliminate low-velocity, high-waste items

Every pound of food waste avoided is pure profit.

5. Implement a Recycle & Compost Program That Staff Actually Uses

Many restaurants *have* recycling—but don't actually recycle because it's contaminated or inconvenient.

Best practices:

- Place recycle bins exactly where the recyclable waste is generated
- Use distinct-colored bins and liners
- Post simple signage (pictures, not words)
- Run "daily reset" checks to ensure bins are properly used

If composting is available, it dramatically reduces dumpster volume and lowers pickup frequency.

6. Reevaluate To-Go Packaging and Single-Use Items

Restaurants often overspend on packaging that creates unnecessary waste.

Improvements include:

- Offer "condiments on request," not automatic
- Reduce napkin and utensil inclusion in digital orders
- Switch to stackable containers to reduce storage footprint
- Replace high-volume single-use items with multi-use or portion-controlled alternatives

Small packaging changes can result in significant monthly savings.

7. Maximize Recycling of Fats, Oils, and Grease (FOG)

Used fryer oil is a resource, not a nuisance.

Work with reputable oil recycling vendors who:

- Pay rebates based on oil quality
- Provide lockable, clean storage containers
- Offer training to prevent spills and burns

FOG mismanagement leads to health department violations, pest issues, and expensive plumbing emergencies.

8. Keep Loading Docks and Waste Areas Clean and Secure

Your trash area reflects your brand—even if customers never see it.

Maintain:

- Daily wash-downs of pads and drains
- Locked dumpsters (keeps illegal dumping and scavengers away)
- Proper lighting for night shifts
- Clear paths free of grease, boxes, or slip hazards

A clean waste area prevents pests, improves employee safety, and reduces surprise visits from local health or sanitation authorities.

9. Track Waste Metrics the Same Way You Track Labor and Food Cost

You can't manage what you don't measure.

Track:

- Dumpster pulls per week
- Cost per pull
- Volume of cardboard vs. food waste
- Oil recycling revenue
- Number of trash runs per shift

Restaurants who monitor these metrics consistently reduce waste costs by 15–40%.

The Bottom Line: Waste Is a Cost You Can Control

Waste management is one of the few operational levers where a restaurant can save money *today* without compromising guest experience.

With smarter processes, proper training, optimized equipment, and better product choices, restaurants can cut waste costs, reduce labor inefficiencies, and run cleaner, safer operations.

If your restaurant needs a full waste-management optimization—audits, vendor negotiation, process redesign, or staff training—**U.S. Restaurant Consultants** can help streamline it end-to-end.