Zero waste saves bins of cash: Ontario Place among firms with summer goal to help the bottom line


Abstract

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"We don't want to be preachy," she said, adding garbage bins will always be on site. "The key is to make sure there isn't any cross-contamination of recyclables."

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Full Text

If Jaime Carnevale is driving along and sees cardboard flapping on the side of the road, she'll stop and pick it up.

It's not because she's obsessively tidy. It's because she knows there's value in recyclables.

As the maintenance administrator at Ontario Place, the 33-year-old Carnevale has spearheaded the waterfront park’s greening efforts that have led to a zero-waste target for this summer.

While zero waste is nearly impossible, the designation requires audits to indicate at least 90 per cent of waste is diverted from landfill or incineration.

"I saw there were so many opportunities," said Carnevale. "It was a lot of work and a lot of time. But it really was easy in one sense: It's just tweaking what you're doing."

That means selling cardboard as well as plastic bottles and aluminum cans to a recycler for cash - generating almost $8,000 last year. Staff built a dozen outdoor composters out of old skids, turning restaurant and picnic leftovers into fertilizer for 35,000 square feet of gardens on the sprawling waterfront property.

Indoor worm composters turn old newspapers, shredded paper and food from the offices into more compost. Instead of sending 65 tonnes of garbage to landfill, Ontario Place managed to cut hauling costs by 70 per cent last year, which translates into more than $85,000 in savings.

Yard waste from last fall is sitting in bags, waiting to be mixed in with organics from meals and snacks that will be generated when the park opens in May.

Aside from composting, Ontario Place is also focusing on what materials are used in its cafes and restaurants. That means all food vendors won't sell fountain drinks with straws - in part because they are not compostable, but also because the straws are dangerous for wildlife.

Beverages are to be sold in cans or plastic bottles, and all beer and coffee is sold in compostable cups.
Takeout containers and cutlery will be biodegradable or compostable, and the park is buying a solar-powered machine to shred these items for composting.

And in addition to regular recycling bins, Ontario Place is planning on getting 10 reverse vending machines, set up at busy locations, where patrons can feed a plastic bottle or can into the machine.

Carnevale thinks this will be a hit with children. Patrons who use the machine will get a coupon for 10 per cent off a ride or product. This will save on labour costs for emptying recycling bins, because each machine can hold hundreds of containers.

Carnevale said none of these changes would have been possible without the full support of management, who champion these green efforts.

She knows there will always be some items that can't be recycled or composted, such as a chocolate bar wrapper or potato chip bag, because they are made of mixed materials. She just wants staff and visitors to think about what they can do.

"We don't want to be preachy," she said, adding garbage bins will always be on site. "The key is to make sure there isn't any cross-contamination of recyclables."

To promote lessons learned, the park plans to open a new nature pavilion that will showcase its waste diversion efforts, including its worm composters.

Carnevale is inspiring others, including her husband's cousin, chef and owner of Union restaurant, a French-style bistro on the trendy Ossington Ave. strip.

Teo Paul, who opened his restaurant in 2009, is throwing all his vegetable peels and ends plus paper towels from the washrooms into five homemade composters.

He is still using the city's green organics bin once a week for fish and meat scraps, bones and leftovers, but is hoping to avoid it altogether once he gets an airtight composting system in place.

Paul buys produce from small farmers in Grey County, and he's planning on trucking his compost to them. "Hopefully, we can barter some vegetables for the soil," Paul joked.

He also uses a flat-top grill to cook his food, instead of traditional burners, thereby reducing the need for pots and pans, and ensuring grease doesn't end up being washed down the drain. With the grill, he can capture all the grease and sell it to a chicken farmer who uses it for feed.

If diners want to take leftovers home, Paul's staff wraps them up in compostable butcher paper.

Densely occupied office towers can also make a huge impact on recycling efforts. The Simpson Tower, at the corner of Queen and Bay, was declared Canada's first zero-waste office building in 2007, diverting 96 per cent of its waste from landfill.

"The first year, we wondered, is this a blip? But our tenants have embraced it," said Arlena Herbert, general manager of the 32-storey tower. "It's a no-brainer. People are doing it at home."

The first step was replacing the regular garbage bins with three other kinds: one for organics, one for paper, and one for multi-materials including items that cannot be recycled, like dead pens or a granola bar wrapper, which will be taken out at the recycling depot.

Initially, there was some grumbling, especially about washing out takeout food containers, but if the items are clean, more can be recycled.

The cleaners were instructed not to take bins that weren't properly sorted, reminders were left, and property management staff would speak to tenants about why they weren't emptied.

"It's a tough love program. The cleaning staff have trust in us that we will stick up for them. And 100 per cent of the time, they were right," Herbert said.

Jessica Wilkinson of the Recycling Council of Ontario says there's been a fundamental change in attitudes toward recycling.

"People have made a paradigm shift. It's more than the bottom line," Wilkinson said, adding companies that can prove their recyclables are clean and sorted can get a better price.

"It's part of our culture now."

Credit: Vanessa Lu Toronto Star

Illustration

Caption: Jaime Carnevale of Ontario Place helped the waterfront park generate $8,000 in recyclables last year. Green initiatives such as worm compost, left - for old newspapers, shredded paper and food - and a reverse vending machine for recycling cans and bottles are part of Ontario Place's zero-waste target for the summer. David cooper/Toronto star photos

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