

Coffee roaster abuzz with waste prevention strategy

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"We really try to live up to our name," joked Kelly Zeissner, VP at America's Best Coffee Roasting Company. Since 1993, the Oakland, Calif., company has sourced, roasted and blended coffees to its clients' specifications, customizing offerings of wholesale coffees and teas including custom packaging.

A couple of years ago, the company started exploring ways to improve its waste management processes. "We recycle a lot of our waste: coffee chaff goes to animal feed, coffee jute sacks are used by a gardening company," explained Zeissner.

But what of the packaging used for deliveries to clients?

The cardboard boxes were the first to go. Fifty were used every week for all local deliveries to small customers. They usually would be reused several times but eventually would have to be discarded and replaced with new ones. Starting in the summer of 2012, the company replaced them with 66 durable, reusable hand-held crates. In addition to eliminating cardboard waste and recurring purchasing costs for new cardboard boxes, the reusable crates turned out to be ergonomically advantageous as they feature handles and can be stacked more securely than cardboard boxes.

A big sticky point remained to be addressed: plastic bags. Zeissner was unhappy with the large amount of recurring plastic waste. Determined to find a better way, she looked into recycling. "We couldn't find a recycler for the plastic bags," she said.

Unique challenge, custom solution

The challenge she faced is best described through the interactions with the roaster's largest wholesale client. "We would roast the coffee, package it into specially coated, food-grade plastic bags that hold 5 pounds each and pack those into cardboard boxes for delivery, 10 bags per box," she said. The client would then create the proprietary blend and repack the beans into new plastic bags. A portion of those would get shipped back to ABC Roasting Company for final repacking into smaller bags used by airlines and hotels.

The company explored the idea of eliminating the bags altogether and using reusable bulk packaging materials. After thorough research of available products, it purchased two large [Ropak hopper bottom bulk containers](#) to supplement a set of existing reusable bulk containers.

Although the purchase was a sizeable expense, Zeissner was able to offset the cost partially with grant funding from local public agency [StopWaste](#), whose staff also provided technical assistance in choosing the containers and incorporating them into the production process.

Unexpected benefits

The new shipping system implemented last year is operating smoothly, and has yielded positive returns. Shipping the coffee in bulk eliminates the purchasing and disposal costs associated with about 1,000 plastic bags each week. Because product is transported in a closed loop between ABC Roasting Company and its client, the bulk containers are easy to track, and the risk of loss is minimal.

Labor savings, however, have turned out to be the largest benefit for both businesses. "In the past, we would spend about two days worth of labor each week to pack the coffee into bags, and then unpack it when it came back to us. And our customer had to do the same on their end," explained Zeissner. "At \$15 per hour, it adds up."

ABC Roasting Company's customer initially was hesitant to implement the change, which Zeissner attributed to "a general aversion to change that we see with most of our clients." This is where relationship building paid off. "Over the years our clients have learned they can trust us to do what's in their best interest, so we were able to get them on board without difficulty," she said.

Zeissner has been encouraged by the significant waste reduction achieved by the new shipping and delivery processes, and by the hundreds of dollars in estimated weekly savings that it has brought the company.

She is determined to continue her quest for more waste reduction and better efficiency. "In hindsight, it didn't really take that much effort," she said. "I hope other companies feel inspired, and consider similar changes for their businesses."

Maybe a cup of coffee will help get your ideas and creative juices flowing.

Top image: Van Ho of ABC Roasting Company preps a bulk container for delivery to a large customer (courtesy of Justin Lehrer.)

