

# STACKING UP SINGLE-USE VERSUS REUSABLE FOODSERVICE PRODUCTS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR FOODSERVICE OPERATORS



A growing number of consumers are turning to foodservice outlets for their meals and snacks. To meet this demand, foodservice operators must decide how best to serve their customers in a cost-effective, convenient, safe and, yes, sustainable manner.

When serving customers, operators have two choices: foodservice packaging traditionally designed to be used once then disposed of, or their counterparts that are designed to be reused over and over. How do you make that choice? Here are the issues to consider and how single-use versus reusables stack up.

## COMPARE THE COST

The opportunity to save money by not having to buy single-use foodservice packaging is a common argument in favor of reusables. But it's not that simple. If you select reusables, like glasses, mugs,

dinnerware and utensils, consider the following costs:

- Initial purchase of those reusable items; racks, carts, shelving, etc. to store items; and dishwasher(s).
- Occasional expenses to replace broken, damaged or stolen items — yes, customers have been known to steal reusable items! — plus service and replacement of aging equipment.
- Ongoing costs for dishwashing detergent, water and energy to operate the dishwasher.
- Permanent labor costs to wash and store reusable items.

The bottom line is there are costs for both single-use foodservice packaging and their reusable counterparts. Do the math for your operation and see which option comes out ahead. It just may be a toss-up.



# FOODSERVICE PACKAGING: CONSIDERATIONS FOR FOODSERVICE OPERATORS



**WHAT IS FOODSERVICE PACKAGING?** Foodservice packaging refers to single-use cups, containers, bags, wraps, cutlery, etc., used by restaurants and other establishments that offer prepared foods and beverages. These items, made from a variety of materials like paper, plastic and aluminum, allow foodservice operators to serve their customers in a sanitary, convenient and economical manner.

## PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT

The opportunity to cut waste is another common argument in favor of reusables. Again, it's not that simple, as both options have environmental impacts.

If you offer single-use items:

- Most likely, there is more material generated in your operations. However, does that material have to be considered waste? Can it be recycled or composted instead of being landfilled? Recycling or composting these items may even help to lower your trash bills.
- Valuable resources are being used to manufacture foodservice packaging. But, can you opt for items that have been light-weighted (meaning they use less materials), include recycled content or are made from renewable materials?

If you offer reusable items:

- You are most likely generating less material in your operation — we won't count the reusables that are accidentally broken or thrown away by your customers from time to time.
- You may not be using resources to manufacture single-use packaging, but keep in mind that you are using other resources like water and energy to wash and dry reusable items multiple times a day.

When it comes to the environment, single-use foodservice packaging and their reusable counterparts both have environmental impacts.

## CONSIDER YOUR OPERATIONS

There may be operational reasons to select single-use foodservice packaging or reusable products. Consider the footprint of your operation:

- **Front-of-house:** Think about how you'll collect the reusable dishes after your customers are done. Assuming you don't have table service, you'll need additional space in the dining room for customers to deposit these items. Of course, the same is true for single-use items, but in that case, it's offering trash bins, hopefully paired with recycling and / or composting bins.

**Back-of-house:** You'll need additional space for the equipment and labor to wash the dishes, as well as store them. Something to consider if you're short on real estate is that single-use foodservice packaging takes up less space than reusable counterparts, since these items are often "nested" and compact when shipped and stored.



**INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE** about recycling and composting foodservice packaging? Check out [recyclefsp.org](http://recyclefsp.org) and [recyclefoam.org](http://recyclefoam.org).



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## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Check out [this resource](#) from FPI for more details on the sanitary benefits of foodservice packaging.



## MAINTAIN SAFETY AND SANITATION

Any materials — including paper, plastic, metals, glass and ceramics — that come in contact with food are thoroughly tested by the appropriate regulatory agencies. Rest assured, single-use and reusable items have been deemed safe for use, or they wouldn't be in the marketplace.

However, single-use foodservice packaging is more sanitary than reusables. Single-use items are manufactured, packed and shipped, arriving clean and ready for use. As long as you store them properly, they offer a more sanitary option to serve your customers.

On the other hand, reusables have to be properly washed and stored after each use. And, unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. How many times have you found a lipstick stain on your reusable glass or food stuck on silverware after it's been "washed?"

## ADD IN CONVENIENCE

There is no denying that single-use foodservice packaging is convenient for your customers. It allows today's on-the-go customers to enjoy foods and beverages anywhere, while keeping hot foods hot and cold foods cold.

And, customers don't have to remember to carry their own reusable containers, mugs or cutlery throughout their day, which can be a hassle and potentially unsanitary.

## CREATE SALES OPPORTUNITIES

Single-use foodservice packaging supports today's trends and can help drive sales. For example, a growing number of operators are offering catering, delivery and grab-and-go options. Single-use foodservice packaging is a critical component of these sales drivers. Reusable items aren't really an option.

And, while both single-use and reusables can be branded, the real sales opportunity is using foodservice packaging as a "walking billboard." Your customers promote your brand as they enjoy foods and beverages on the go. Again, reusables don't provide that same opportunity.

There are certainly many considerations when deciding to use single-use or reusable items. But in the end, single-use foodservice packaging is simply a better choice than reusable packaging.



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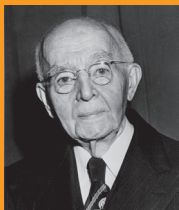
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# FOODSERVICE PACKAGING: SANITATION

**Foodservice packaging is safe, sanitary, convenient and economical. That's why it's called "the sensible solution."**

Americans like to eat out. A lot. That means plenty of food-to-go and carryout. Single-use foodservice packaging products become more than just a convenience. Properly stored and handled foodservice packaging aids public health and minimizes the opportunity for food contamination.



#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

FPI co-sponsors the Crumline Consumer

Protection Award, which honors local environmental health jurisdictions that demonstrate outstanding food protection services to their communities. The award is named for renowned public health physician Dr. Samuel Crumline, who campaigned successfully to eradicate the use of the common cup.



#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Foodservice packaging is manufactured, packed and shipped so it arrives clean at foodservice establishments.

This helps keep food safe and consumers healthy. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration supports the use of foodservice packaging for sanitary and health benefits. In fact, FDA's Food Code requires operators to use single-use products in certain circumstances. [Learn more here.](#)



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# FOODSERVICE PACKAGING: SANITATION



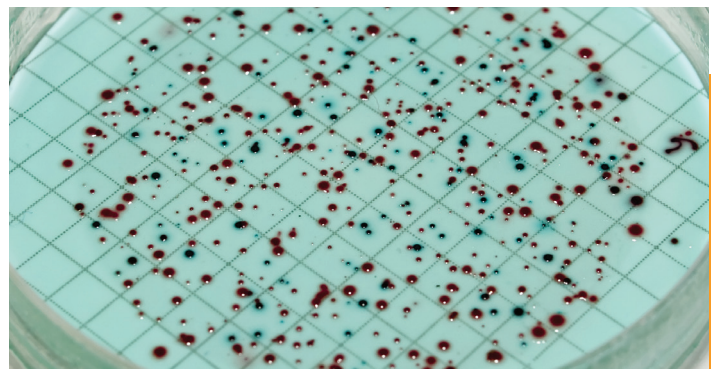
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**DO** store foodservice packaging in its original container or other protective storage in a cool, clean, dry location at least 6 inches above the floor.

**DON'T** store foodservice packaging in areas such as locker rooms, bathrooms, garbage or mechanical rooms, or under leaky pipes, open stairwells or other sources of contamination.

**DO** stack items bottoms-up on sanitary surfaces to prevent contamination of food-and-lip-contact surfaces. Or consider using dispensers, especially for items like unwrapped straws and cutlery. Make sure this is done in both the front and back of the house.

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**DID YOU KNOW?** Numerous studies have found higher microbial levels on reusable items than single-use items. Coliform bacteria were especially prevalent on reusables.

**DON'T** eat or drink from single-use items that have fallen on the floor or touched soiled surfaces.

**DO** keep eating surfaces clean by handling packaging by the sides or bottom, and store unwrapped cutlery handles-up. Consider disposable gloves for extra protection.

**DON'T** wash and reuse foodservice packaging.

**DO** place secure waste bins in visible places — and empty promptly



**DID YOU KNOW?** Tables or trays can carry up to 23 times more bacteria than those not protected by single-use placemats or tray covers.



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