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world's biggest hotel companies

TRENDING

Bamboo
straws at
Avani

MAKING THE SWITCH

HOTELS FIND ELIMINATING PLASTIC STRAWS ISN'T DIFFICULT – BUT IT DOES TAKE PLANNING AND RESEARCH TO BREAK THE HABIT.

Contributed by **DEBBIE CARLSON**

More hotels are ditching single-use plastic straws, whether forced to find alternatives because of legislation or because of environmental concerns.

"It's a remarkably simple thing to do. And to be frank, I wished we'd done it earlier," says John Roberts, group director of sustainability and conservation at Bangkok-based Minor Hotels, whose Anantara and

Avani brands stopped using single-use plastic straws in all Asian properties in 2018.

But it does mean finding the right alternative to plastic straws, stirrers and cocktail sticks. Simon Amos, hotel manager at Hilton Waikoloa Village in Hawaii, the first Hilton property to go plastic-straw free in 2018, says the F&B teams tested different types of material: paper, corn starch, even candy, before settling on a compostable paper straw.

"We weren't sure if they would work in hot drinks, cold drinks, how long they'd last. Would they bend? Would they go soggy?" Amos says.

The hotel depleted its inventory before the switch. There were a few errant plastic straws after the change, but by the end of the first week, Waikoloa Village was 100% compliant. Hilton removed plastic straws from its managed hotels at the end of 2018,



A Banyan Tree employee participates in a beach cleanup.

and in July will enforce compliance with its franchisees, says Caitrin O'Brien, Hilton corporate sustainability senior manager.

Different materials are available, from single-use paper or bamboo to reusable metal and silicone. Amos says the hotel just switched to a straw made from a wheat stem, a product normally discarded (also gluten-free). Sometimes a supplier switch is necessary.

Successful transitions require buy-in from F&B teams and sometimes need a bit of a mind shift from staff. The first step can be asking F&B staff to opt out of automatically giving straws to reduce total usage, says Roy Breiman, director of F&B at Seattle-based Columbia Hospitality, which owns and manages 42 properties, the majority in Washington state.

"People have been kind of programmed to think that a straw comes with every beverage that you send out," he says.

Columbia worked with the Lonely Whale Foundation to help bring about Seattle's plastic straw ban. It took a little education to change habits with staff and guests, but many quickly came on board. "You encourage them to be part of this very positive movement to eradicate something that is kind of useless," he says.

Minor's Roberts says allowing hotels, whether owned or managed, to choose alternatives helped. Some started creating drinks around different straws, such as

using vegetables like celery for straws. "You throw an idea out there and some people are really inspired and go ahead and say, well, that sounds cool. What can I do?"

SUCKING UP THE COST

Plastic straw alternatives do cost more. Paul Saucedo, corporate director of sales and marketing for The Godfrey Hotel Boston, which uses waxed paper straws at its restaurant, Ruka, and lobby bar, says costs doubled, but it's a relatively small amount more than covered by their use, frequently in higher-margin cocktails.

Roberts says the metal straws some Anantara locations use cost 17 times more than plastic. Many hotels find their costs eventually go down because they first opted out of giving any type of straw. Hilton says its Seattle Airport and Conference Center saves US\$3,000 monthly this way.

Many hotels announce in advance their plans to switch. Branding expert Rachel Weingarten says hotels making these pledges need to ensure they follow through. Consultant Bjorn Hanson agrees.

"Brands who announce these initiatives have to be careful not to overstate (what they're doing) because of the backlash of 'I trusted you and you deceived me.' It doesn't just do damage to the individual hotel, but it can interfere with the whole issue of brand value and integrity," he says.

HOW BANYAN TREE DID IT

On Earth Day 2018, Banyan Tree announced a goal to reduce and ultimately eliminate all single-use plastic. One year later, the hotel has seen a 24% reduction across all properties.

Banyan Tree started by measuring its "plastic footprint," says Steve Newman, the company's head of group sustainability. The chain wanted to know what it used, how much and where, eventually tracking 31 categories of plastic use. Banyan Tree's top-performing properties are in the Maldives, where they reduced single-use plastic by 73%.

Some changes were easy. Instead of using plastic trash-can liners, it now uses washable bins. Landscaping bags are now reusable. Instead of serving condiments like butter in plastic containers, washable dishes are used. "Sometimes it requires us to go back to how hospitality used to be," Newman says.

The company struggles with how to eliminate plastics from products used in back-of-house necessary for hygiene, like cling film and plastic gloves for food prep, he says. But it is approaching alternative ideas with an eye toward long-term investment.

"When you have properties that use over US\$10,000 of cling film a year, you can start looking at things over a longer period of time and justify alternatives in that manner. If over three years you spend US\$30,000 on cling film, (maybe) you can eventually find an alternative that would last longer than three years," Newman says.