

COMPOSTABLE FOODSERVICE PRODUCTS AS ALTERNATIVE CONVENTIONAL SERVICE WARES: INPUTS TO CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF FAST-FOOD CHAINS

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ABSTRACT

Food establishments are now considering the integration of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in their businesses because of its contribution to the economy, the environment, and the society. The purpose of this study was to assess the acceptability of shifting from conventional to compostable foodservice products of fast-food chains as part of the latter's CSR. Data were collected from representatives of three fast-food chains in Tanauan, Batangas. The instrument used was semi-structured interview with some forced-choice questions relating to the acceptability towards the use of compostable foodservice products as CSR of each property. Results indicated that most of the assessments of the participants were balanced. They were not willing to shift from conventional to compostable food service products but they believed that the use of the latter could be considered as a form of CSR. This is a critical study to be utilized in helping other food establishments decide which the type of foodservice products to use.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, compostable foodservice products, conventional service wares, fast-food chains

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which refers to operating a business in a socially and ethically accountable manner and the deliberate inclusion of public interest into corporate decision-making, has become an important business concept over the past few years (Welford, 2004). In fact, according to the article published by The Consumer Goods Forum (2011), CSR has developed to one of the top priorities of businesses over the last decade having been ranked in 2011 as the number one focus of managers in the global retail and consumer goods sector.

Thus, it is not surprising that most of the companies today are adopting ways on how to apply CSR principles in their business operations. The voluntary incorporation of social and environmental issues into a

company's business model and operations attempts to meet the needs and expectations of range of stakeholders (Green paper: Promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility, 2001).

In the Philippines alone, companies such as the Ayala Group, Lopez Group of Companies and Aboitiz Group of Companies practice CSR. There are also multinational companies operating in the country that are strong advocates of CSR, such as Coca-Cola, Nestlé and Unilever (del Rosario, Dumangas & Miral, 2011).

Moreover, CSR is of great concern for the hospitality and restaurant industries. For instance, the Argonauta Hotel in Boracay practices CSR by including proper waste disposal and waste segregation, feeding programs, building access roads and donating money to support local school's sports fest in their business operations.

Although CSR initiatives in food industries might seem complex, it was simplified by Maloni and Brown (2006) thru the CSR food supply chain's framework consisted of health and safety, animal welfare, biotechnology, community, environment, financial practices, labor, and procurement. Given that the environment is one of the categories concerning CSR of food industries, there are many environmental CSR practices that could be considered including the use of compostable foodservice products.

To be considered compostable, plastic material must breakdown within 180 days in a commercial compost facility, according to the American Society for Testing and Materials. It must be able to breakdown into carbon dioxide, water and biomass at the same rate as the paper. It also needs to look like compost, should not produce any toxic material and should be able to support plant life. Compostable items are made from plant materials such as corn, potato, cellulose, soy, sugar and the like (Cross, 2014).

As more customers recognize the seriousness of environmental problems, the consumer choices are becoming more ecologically conscious as they purchase products and services that are environmentally friendly (Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010). For this reason, restaurant owners are adopting Green Practice (GP) to their properties by becoming members of green associations, such as Green Restaurant Association (GRA).

In 2014, www.squadle.com compiled a list of restaurants who have gone green and one of which is the largest coffee chain in the world-- Starbucks. It works to both recycling and reducing wastes and implementing the usage of environmental friendly cups. Also included in the list is Boloco in New England, it uses 100% compostable bamboo bowls instead of the plastics alternative as well as 100% compostable smoothie cups.

Indeed, the use of compostable foodservice products in food industries has been a long tradition and is being practiced in some areas of the world. Through this study, the acceptability of the integration of

compostable service wares as CSR of each fast-food chain in Tanauan, Batangas will be assessed and the factors affecting the business' decision will also be determined.

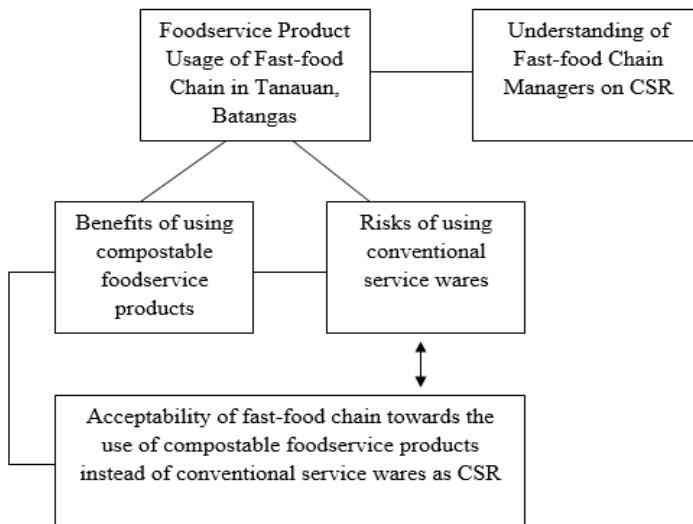


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The main objective of this paper was to assess the acceptability of fast-food chains in Tanauan, Batangas towards the use of compostable instead of conventional service wares as CSR of each property. This study examined the foodservice product usage and understanding on CSR of each fast-food chain as well as the customers' perceptions on the benefits of compostable foodservice products and the risks associated with the use of conventional service wares. All of these may contribute to the responsiveness of fast food chain managers towards the integration of compostable foodservice products in their business operations in considering their CSR. This leads to the development of the conceptual framework, which is presented in Figure 1.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to identify the foodservice product usage of fast-food chains in Tanauan, Batangas; determine the understanding of fast-food chain managers towards Corporate Social Responsibility; assess the risks of using conventional food service wares as to: (a). fast-food chain; (b). Customer and

(c) Food Industry; determine the benefits of using compostable foodservice products as perceived by the manager/supervisor/store owner of fast-food chains in Tanauan, Batangas in terms of: (a). social aspects (b). image/media/industry-related aspects, (c). economic aspects, and (d). environmental aspects; and ascertain the acceptability of fast-food chains in Tanauan, Batangas in replacing conventional with compostable foodservice items in considering their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used the qualitative method of research to find out the acceptability of the integration of compostable service wares as CSR of each fast-food chain in Tanauan, Batangas. It is a method designed to describe the data and characteristics about what is being studied.

Participants of the Study

This study was conducted in three fast-food chains in Tanauan, Batangas: Barikafe, Café de Asis and Hungry Hippo. The participants of the study were the managers of these three fast-food chains. The managers of each establishment were in the best position to answer the interview questions because of their knowledge and years of experience in handling and facilitating the restaurant.

Research Instruments

The instrument used was semi-structured interview with some forced-choice questions relating to the acceptability of the use of compostable foodservice product as CSR of each property. The instrument was developed by the researcher and it consists of three question topics: foodservice product usage, corporate social responsibility, as well as motivations, attitudes and perceptions of compostable and conventional foodservice product usage. The instrument consists of five questions pertaining to the foodservice product usage, four questions regarding the corporate social responsibility, and six questions under the motivations, attitudes and perceptions of compostable and conventional foodservice product usage. The first set includes questions regarding the food service wares of each establishment, the composition, cleaning procedures, span of time they have been using these wares and also the disposal of trash if they are using any compostable foodservice product. The second set of questions

includes the knowledge and awareness of the manager regarding CSR and if so, the CSR activities that they are practicing in their business operation. The last set of questions includes the perceptions of manager towards the benefits of using compostable food service wares and the risks of using conventional foodservice products.

In each set of questions there are additional questions that allow the researcher to further delve into sub-topics. Most of the questions are open-ended while some are forced-choice which is answerable by yes/no.

On the day of the interview, the researchers informed the participants that their conversation would be recorded either through the use of voice-recording device or camcorder whichever they agreed to use. The researchers also provided the participants a copy of Human Subjects Approval and Consent forms.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers first looked for a place where they could conduct the interview. The researchers then selected three fast-food chains: Barikafe, Café de Asis and Hungry Hippo. They first checked if the manager or the owner of the establishment is present on that day. When they met the restaurant manager, they introduced themselves and gave the participant a little background about the purpose of their study. They also informed them that their participation in the interview and the answering of any of the questions was completely voluntary, and that their personal information would remain completely confidential. The researchers then provided the participant a copy of the Human Subjects Approval and Consent Forms. If the participant agreed to participate in the interview, the researchers then informed them that their responses would be recorded either through the use of voice-recording device or camcorder depending on what they preferred and that these responses would be treated with confidentiality.

During the interview, the researchers asked the interview questions in a consistent manner for each participant. The researchers asked the participant open-ended questions from the script in three topic areas: foodservice product usage, corporate social responsibility and motivations, attitude and perceptions of compostable and conventional food service ware usage.

After the interview has been completed, the researchers summed up the discussion of the interview and repeated to the participants the bottom-line or the most significant answer that the researchers are looking for. Following the completion of the interview process, the researchers collected the detailed notes of the participants' responses and transcribed the voice recordings in order to describe all of the data collected for the study.

Data Analysis

The data were collected utilizing detailed, written notes and a digital voice recorder for each of the interview questions. Following this collection, the data were then transcribed using Microsoft Word in order for the researchers to summarize the results based on the responses of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Foodservice Product Usage

The first set of interview questions aims to provide the researchers a background of the foodservice product that is currently in use in each food establishment. This includes the composition and cleaning process of each utensil, as well as the waste management system practiced in each business operation.

All of the participants shared similar answers regarding the utensils they currently use for dine-in and take-out orders. Based on their answers, they have the basic utensils an establishment must have in order to put up a restaurant, such as silverware, glassware and dinnerware.

Barikafe added that since it is operating as a fine dining restaurant, utensils for dine-in must be made up of utensils as stated above. Well-known industry experts define fine dining as one with the ambience, fine tableware and details in service that makes the dinner an event (Schneider, 2007, as cited in Harden, 2007). Thus, there is great emphasis on first-class cutlery, tableware (which could be silver), properly starched napkins, linens and table cloths, and service that is extremely attentive.

Therefore, all of the three fast-food chains were using conventional wares or reusable utensils inside the store while disposable utensils such as cups, spoon, and fork and sauce containers for take-out orders.

Barikafe added that they are not using plastics for take-out but only compostable utensils. Mulder (1998) looked at the lifecycle of plastics. He concluded that both the production and disposal of plastic products negatively affect the environment through the release of toxins in to the air and water.

Meanwhile, none of the participants answered that they were using dishwashing machine in cleaning conventional service wares; instead, they were all washing the utensils manually through the use of hands and dishwashing liquid on the sink.

In terms of waste management system, since the City of Tanauan has a strict ordinance of proper waste disposal, the three fast-food chains disposed their trash accordingly.

Segregation is done through separating biodegradable from non biodegradable and wet stuff. In the waste management process, segregation practice needs to be practiced more strictly and by the waste generators itself (Harsh, Marthur & Shalini, 2012).

In support of the above statement, Barikafe even provided boxes for biodegradable and non- biodegradable waste and gathered all the left-over in a separate container; the same with Café-de-Asis and Hungry Hippo who both separated liquids from solid trash.

Indeed, solid waste problem is not just been responsibility of the city council but also other parties (Dwijendra, 2012).

Corporate Social Responsibility

The second set of interview questions dealt with the understanding of fast-food chain managers on Corporate Social Responsibility. Thru this, the perception of the managers towards CSR was identified and the types of CSR on each fast-food chain was determined.

After analyzing the data from the three participants, all of them shared similar opinions on the meaning of Corporate of Social Responsibility.

Barikafe mentioned that CSR is a commitment of a certain business in which others will benefit. According to Abrams (2003), business derives a number of benefits, by being committed to Social Responsibility and by being involved in community activities and causes.

In support of the above statement, Barikafe has been involved in different types of CSR including Tubig Batangan Cancer Warriors, proper waste disposal management and giving food to the street children.

Café-de-asis, on the other hand, mentioned that CSR is a way of helping government institutions and less fortunate organizations such as public schools. Although their practice of CSR only started in the year 2015, they have already donated books and plastic bottles and have acquired waste management system in their business operation.

Unlike Barikafe that gives food to the street children, Hungry hippo avoids giving left over to the needy person in their community because they care for their health. But like what the two fast-food chains mentioned in the study, Hungry Hippo is also practicing waste management system in their business.

To sum up, the three participants believed that CSR is a way of helping the community. It is a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment (Cadbury, 2006).

Proper waste disposal management or the separation of biodegradable and non-biodegradable wastes seems to have appeared in all of the CSR of the three fast-food chains. This is because waste management system, as a form of environmental CSR, minimizes risk to public health and results in clean, healthy environment for all citizens (McDougall, 2001).

Moreover, environmental CSR minimizes the ecological impact of organizational operation in a number of ways, such as, preventing environmental pollution, devoting resources to environmental protection, and voluntarily committing to governmentally sanctioned environmental rules and laws Mallin (2009).

Motivations, Attitudes, Perceptions

The third set of interview questions dealt with the perceptions of fast-food chain managers on the environmental risks associated with the use of conventional service wares and the benefits of using compostable foodservice products. Thru this, the acceptability of the participants towards the integration of compostable foodservice product in their business operation will be identified and the factors affecting their decision will be determined.

Risks of using conventional service wares

a. Fast-food Chain

All of the participants were unanimous in their opinion of the environmental risks associated with the use of conventional service wares. They similarly stated that they use up too much of the water supply, since conventional or reusable dining implements need to be washed after every use. Johnson (2010) stated on his study that restaurants use hundreds of thousands of gallons of water every year.

Aside from high water consumption, Hungry Hippo added that the disposal of non-sewage items like oils and fats into water poses a risk into the environment. This is also seen as a major problem in the UK, since these items can cause blockage problems to sewers damaging the infrastructure, and potentially causing problems to human health (Environmental Information Exchange, 2013).

Also, the use of metal cutlery poses an environmental concern that biodegradable utensils don't have: the impact of cleaning utensils. The utensils must be cleaned after each use, requiring water usage as the use of cleaning products (Bilec, Hottle, Landis & Meeks, 2015).

Café-de-Asis considered the chemicals found in dishwashing liquids as a threat in the environment. According to Hill (2015), the phosphorus and nitrogen from detergents stimulate the growth of algae and other aquatic vegetation therefore causing eutrophication or the process in which fresh water ecosystem dies because of oxygen depletion.

Since reusable dining implements require cleaning detergents to remove grease and stains of glasses, plates and cutlery; simple task of washing dishes therefore can have a negative impact in the environment.

b. Customer

Improper handling of reusable dining implements in food establishments poses great potential for food contamination. Presumably, food-borne diseases sometimes acquired in hotels and restaurants are through dishes, plates and other kitchen equipment. Therefore, one important task is to make sure dishes, spoons and cutlery are kept clean (Maori & De, 2010).

Also, the warm dishwater in the home and also in the restaurant, contributes not only the vehicle for spreads of contamination from one piece of tableware to another but at the same time furnishes an optimum temperature, a fluid medium, and an intermediate conveyor for large and small group of individuals, and the larger the group the greater the possibility of carriers of infecting non-immunes (Lynch & Cumming, 1919).

So far, with the use of reusable dining implements, there were no cases of food contamination recorded in the three fast-food chains.

c. Food Industry

Barikafe and Hungry Hippo conducted regular inventory of foodservice items to make sure that they follow the standards of a fine dining restaurant.

Meanwhile, Café-de-Asis added that the avoidance of using damaged dining implements should also be observed to avoid hazards and accidents to customers.

Benefits of using compostable foodservice products

a. Social aspects

The participants noted that the use of compostable foodservice product, particularly as take-out containers, helped them in doing their part in the green movement of Tanauan, Batangas since the area has a strict

regulation with the use of plastic. Moreover, they regarded the business as responsible for following the rules and regulation of the city.

The feeling of pride and accomplishment was also established since they are considering the use of compostable foodservice product as a way of preserving the environment.

b. Image/Media/Industry-related aspects

All participants agreed that the use of compostable dining implements can serve as a strong marketing tool especially for environment-conscious client.

Café-de-Asis believed that awards, certificates, and industry recognition also encourage them to use compostable take-out containers, although they haven't received one since then.

c. Economic aspects

Participants shared different views on the economical benefits of using compostable foodservice product.

During the time when Barikafe was still using compostable service ware in their business operation, they had a great energy and water expense savings for they only compost and dispose the utensils once used.

Café-de-Asis, on the other hand, believed that compostable dining implements are more expensive compared to the conventional one but they also emphasized that it could generate more job thru production of these products.

Meanwhile, Hungry Hippo considered the use of compostable service wares as more convenient since using stainless steel or ceramics as take-out containers is heavier and requires careful handling due to its composition.

d. Environmental aspects

The participants shared similar responses that compostable foodservice product can help in the environment, especially in the conservation and cleanliness of water supply. Since according to Mansvelt (2011), disposable drinking cups have the advantages that they do not have to be washed and that they can be used as "carry-out" drinks, the accumulation of oil deposits in the sewage system will be lessen and the amount of chemical deposits due to dishwashing liquid will be decreased.

Acceptability of fast-food chains

Barikafe, Café-de-Asis and Hungry Hippo turned down the idea of replacing conventional service wares with compostable one in their business operation.

Barikafe stated that since they had difficulties in the delivery of compostable foodservice products in their business operation, they decided to go back to the traditional dining implements to avoid inconvenience to customers.

Café-de-asis also sees compostable as impractical to their business since these products are costly but if offered at a lower price or if the government would allocate budget for business establishments to afford compostable foodservice products then he would be willing to use one in their business.

Meanwhile, Hungry Hippo also disagreed because for them the use of compostable foodservice products seems inappropriate for a fine dining restaurant.

Despite the disapproval of the three fast-food chains towards the replacement of conventional serviceware with compostable foodservice product in their business operation, they still consider the use of the latter as a form of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) because of the benefits it could give to the environment and the business establishment.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. The selected fast-food chains in Tanauan, Batangas are using conventional food service wares (e.g. metal spoon and fork, glasses and ceramic plates) for dine-in orders while compostable foodservice products (e.g. compostable spoon and fork, cups, sauce containers etc.) for take-out orders. They have been using these utensils from the time they started their business operation.
2. Managers of the selected fast-food chains defined Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a way of helping the community. All of them are engaged into different CSR to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment.
3. The selected fast-food chains believed that using conventional food service wares poses environmental and health risks to fast-food chain, customer and food industry including using up of too much water supply, accumulation of chemical and oil deposits in the

sewage system, food contamination and the use of damaged dining implements.

4. Benefits of using compostable foodservice products are enumerated by the managers of the selected fast-food chain as a great help in the green movement, a strong marketing tool, energy and water savers, more convenient than stainless steel and a great contribution to the reservation and cleanliness of water supply.
5. The results indicated that the assessments of the three fast-food chains are balanced. They are not willing to shift from conventional to compostable dining implements in view of the difficulty in the delivery of such utensils and the impracticality and the inappropriateness in a fine dining restaurant.; but managers still consider the use of compostable foodservice product as CSR because of the benefits it could grant to the environment and the business establishment.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Increase the number of participants involved in the study to have extensive analysis of the data.
2. Include consumer participation for further research to view their opinions towards the use of compostable dining implements.
3. Create cost analyses in the areas of energy and water expenditures to have greater comparison of data in the study.
4. Educate employees and clientele with the advantages and disadvantages of compostable and conventional foodservice products.
5. Given that the compostable utensils cost more than their reusable counterparts thus inhibiting fast-food chains to shift to the former, it is recommended that the study be extended to the government for some possible actions.

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