

Lessons from the Field

Philadelphia Eagles on Waste Diversion



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March 2013 – We asked Leonard Bonacci, Vice President of Event Services and Event Operations with the Philadelphia Eagles at Lincoln Financial Field, to help us answer frequently asked questions about waste diversion at teams and venues. Here's what he had to say.

What got you started recycling and composting at Lincoln Financial Field?

Our ownership feels strongly that there is no offseason to good citizenship. And, operating with green business practices is part of that citizenship obligation. So, we started by asking questions: What are we using on our fields now? How much are we using and why? Can we use less? What are we throwing away?

To be clear, we didn't ask these questions to one particular department, we asked them of every facet of our business. From there, we set a baseline and we began to measure the progress we were making toward reducing our footprint. The fields were a natural extension of this process of looking hard at what we were doing and why.

What were the steps you took to start both the recycling and composting programs?

It all started with a small blue bucket. We were asked to put the small blue bucket under our desks. Any paper we had to throw away, we put in the bucket.

We then moved into the area of concessions—looking at what is it we are throwing away. We took a trash can at the end of the game, dumped it out, and went through everything that was in it. And by the way, this is everybody—the Eagles, our recycling company, the trash handling company and ARAMARK working on this. We asked ARAMARK, “Can you, or are we able to reevaluate what we are throwing away?” They then worked with the recycling company to identify recyclable products we could integrate.

We took a look at how we could make it super easy for fans to participate, and made sure it was easy for staff to participate as well. Football stadiums are a bit different than other venues. You are only guaranteed to play ten times a year, so your staff doesn't enjoy the repetition they may enjoy in other sports. Repetition is the mother of skill. With only ten games, it is hard to galvanize the skill. So, we leaned on other research to help. We consulted a study to that determined how far people would walk to throw something away. We then placed our trash cans this distance apart and put a recycling can right next to them. The amount of recycling went way up, and the amount of trash on the ground went way down. We made it easy so fans would participate.

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We made it equally as easy for staff to participate so that the recycling would make it to the right place—from the concessions to the fans to the recycling bins and then to the recycling dumpster. We put blue bags into the recycling can. The blue bags go in the blue cart, which then goes to a blue dumpster and it is taken to Blue Mountain Recycling. That last part just happened to work out well for our color coding!

We would receive numbers from the recycling company, and watch them go up and up and up. What started as a 13% diversion rate is now at 99.8%.

We applied the basics of a strategic plan—we wrote out a plan as it relates to recycling, and painted a very clear picture of success. We then took the steps to educate the staff. We watched the execution, and evaluated where things could be improved and adjusted. And of course, we celebrated the successes. Our Basic strategy: **Plan, Educate, Execute, Evaluate, Adjust & Celebrate.**

Recycling had gone well so far, so we thought, “Let’s try composting.” We talked to our friends from the Pacific Northwest—the Mariners and Seahawks, among others, to find out how they had done it. We started composting four years ago. We found a farm in Pennsylvania that was willing to help. Starting with one kitchen, he helped teach us how to compost. We then rolled the program out to the entire venue and had to move over to a larger composting facility in Delaware.

We get asked about this often, so can you tell us more about your bins and signage?

From a bins and signage standpoint, at the time, we just purchased our own. We didn’t really take advantage of any one vendor for bins or signage. There are many other teams and venues that have. We now have a partnership with Coca-Cola though.

We went dual stream—bottles and cans in one bin, and everything else in the other. We take the recycled material and separate it in the back of the house. We found that we get more dollars on the pound for metal than glass, so we separate out that metal. You get a lot more money if you pull your metal out! We generate the most money we can—we bail the metal and keep it downstairs and watch the market. When aluminum hits a certain threshold, then we recycle it.

We funnel the dollars earned from recycling back into an incentive program for the staff or pay for other greening initiatives. We’ve sent the parking lot staff across the street to see a game and

enjoy a night on the Eagles. We get them a suite with food and drinks and hire out another company to clean the lot that night. We spend a lot of time incentivizing the parking lot staff—they have the hardest job... aside from the head coach!

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Now, we don't have trash cans anymore. We haven't labeled them composting, but we just compost everything that isn't recyclable.

It's important to celebrate the symbolic moments like when the trash chutes were switched over to recycling chutes. We made a big deal out of it. We had a lot of new signage and senior management thanking the staff and celebrating the success.

What more can you share about educating fans and staff on new recycling and composting programs?

We ran some in-game spots for a light-hearted delivery of the message. Signs over the urinals read: "Recycle your beer here, but recycle your bottle outside in our recycling containers." Again, we made it easy for them to participate.

For the staff, we created an incentive program for amount captured. We wanted to do this in a fun, light way as well. We didn't want everyone to think we were interrupting their day or getting too far away from why everyone was there—the football game.

Side Story: I'm standing in New York City outside of a drugstore. The sign in the windows reads that a single pack of Newport cigarettes is \$12. They've taken the time to tell you that they've jacked up the price, that you have to stand 25 feet from the building to smoke, and show horribly graphic images on the packaging, and still, people smoke. I equate this story to the environmental movement. The buy-in factor unfortunately is not very high. We aren't scaring people into action. We have to make sure the message is not intrusive, but instead say, "Here is how you can be a good citizen."

What partnerships or sponsorships were most crucial to building the waste program to what it is today?

You have to keep the concessionaires and janitorial department in mind first. Our corporate partners—Coca Cola, ARAMARK and our paper company, SCA—were also crucial to the process.

SCA helped us with paper and consumables, like hand towels. We asked them all to reduce the products they're using, to have more efficient operations and lessen our impact on the environment.

We brought in a janitorial service to help us understand how to green our cleaning. What helped the green movement was when capitalism lined up with it. When ARAMARK tells vendors to find a green cleaning product, and if they don't, they'll find someone else who can, the vendor will find that product!

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We're working with Sustainable Waste Solutions, a nonprofit that works with large companies to get to zero-landfill. They help with the tailgate component—the part we can't control. We talked to people in the industry to determine the best way to deal with that waste. We now have a waste-to-energy component of our program.

I like the saying, "Don't let perfection get in the way of progress." We don't love the waste-to-energy process, but it is progress.

I can't emphasize enough how important partners are—quality of the partners and quality of communication. We write it into the contract that our partners are required to participate in the green program. We motivate to them to participate.

How do you keep track of the data and progress?

It is a very underwhelming answer, but we use Microsoft Excel. The janitorial team inputs the recycling numbers, partnering with the recycling center, and that gets fed back into the larger spreadsheet. We really track all the data points. Once a number indicates a change, we check out what is going on—we either fix the problem or celebrate the success.

For instance, we saw the plastics number drop drastically (we weren't recycling as much as normal). This was a concern, so I called concessions to see what was going on. Turns out that when we had started pouring beer into compostable cups, we switched over to aluminum cans rather than plastic bottles. Aluminum is worth more as a recyclable material, and degrades much less than plastic in each recycling process. The cardboard numbers had also gone down, because the cans come in flat cardboard trays rather than full boxes. So the recycling numbers went down because we were simply using less material overall, which is ultimately best for the environment.

We've heard great stories about the Eagles' commitment to recycling – for example, if the team travels to a venue that doesn't have recycling, they pack up the trash and bring it home with them. So, beyond game-day waste diversion at the venue, how else are you reducing your environmental footprint?

Lots of organic waste from landscaping, all of that gets composted. Every factor of the business operations explores where we can reduce landfill waste. It is even part of the RFP process for vendors and capital improvements. If one contractor has a smaller environmental footprint than another, we consider that in their favor.

We've started composting and recycling in the cafeteria. And, we use Rock & Wrap it Up!. We have a great food recovery program we're really proud of.

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The ultimate in sustainability is to just consume less. That is what we've done—asked critical questions again: “What do we consume? How much do we consume? Do we still need to consume that?” Then we try to reduce in every department.

We asked the PR department, “Why do we print so many media guides? Heck, why do we still use media guides?” By the end of the season, the info is generally inaccurate. Asking these critical questions led to piloting a program of putting media guides on flash drives/online instead of printing them.

None of the questions are earth-shattering, but they are thought provoking. When you start to ask a couple of “why’s” you really get to the root of what you actually need to be consuming and then disposing. At some point you have to think differently and make a shift.

We ask the basic questions to get a thought-process going and challenge each other to improve. It's been a lot of fun.

We also have a small solar array on the training facility and a larger one on the stadium. We're off the grid from an energy standpoint. What we are working on now with the city of Philadelphia is water. Every department, on an annual basis, sits down with an external auditing company and has to report on their environmental footprint information to them. That is reviewed by the President. It is taken very seriously throughout our organization.

Everybody is motivated by something different. If you're not motivated to save the planet (one type of green), are you motivated by the other green? By recycling, we've saved over \$300,000 dollars. It just makes too much sense to not be efficient. Theoretically, our solar and wind project will save \$32 million over 20 years.

Some argue that we are in the business of excess in the sports industry, so how are we trying to teach people to be minimalistic? If for nothing else, how about running more efficient operations financially? We have to make it natural for them to buy in.

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You've already achieved one of the highest waste diversion rates in professional sports, so what's next in the waste diversion journey?

From a waste perspective, we're taking a hard look at tickets. We're actually looking at everything we print and asking if we really need to print it. What can be digital? We are asking the questions in a pointed way to each of the department heads, and are challenging them to come back with solutions that maintain the mission of the team and venue, but do it in a less impactful way.

We are fortunate to have a great network of people like the Green Sports Alliance. It is why the Eagles are what they are in the green space today. We didn't do it alone. We learned a lot of things from other people. Really it is the group effort. The communication back and forth is so beneficial. We are happy to be a part of the movement and hope to see it continue to advance.

If you're interested in finding out more about waste diversion or would like to be connected to Leonard Bonacci, please contact:

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