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## Greening Our Event

Planning a “green” conference in 2008 is an exciting, sometimes frustrating, always eye-opening experience. Details are important, and unanswerable questions come up often. For instance: if a lunch tray is made of 99% post-consumer fiber, what makes up the other 1%?

This seems insignificant, but it is important to know if you want to offer the trays for re-use or recycle after this set of consumers has had their day with them. According to the manufacturer, the trays were made of 99% pulp fiber (paper) and 1% officially unknown.

Composting was on our minds, but the mysterious 1% might wreak havoc on a compost pile. Depending on the material, it can sit idle while the other 99% becomes worm food, or it can interfere with the rest and destroy your compost. What to do? The trays were made mostly of paper, so perhaps we could recycle them in the paper recycling bin? A wise person reminded us that soiled paper is not recyclable, so unless we were all really neat during lunch the trays would have to go into the regular trash.

Our next clever idea was simply to purchase certified compostable dishware, which we could guiltlessly send to the Lower East Side Ecology Center downtown for composting. “Hold on, this isn’t as easy as you think,” said the compost experts. “You need to estimate the amount of waste 450 guests will produce, and it will likely be way too much for us to handle.”

Thus began our long journey through the world of waste reduction. “You can’t just switch from plastic to compostables and think it’s okay to keep using a new cup every time you want a drink.” Our environmentally aware egos were taking a beating by phone all the way from the Lower East Side. “It’s not just about getting rid of all this in an environmentally friendly way-- it’s about reducing the amount of waste you create in the first place. Try to find a way to use less, and make that a learning experience for yourselves and others. Why don’t you rent plates, or have guests bring their own?”

Yikes! Aren’t you glad we went with the first option? Today, as you enter the lunch line, you won’t pick up paper trays and plates or plastic forks and spoons. Instead, you will be offered real plates and utensils. We hope you will appreciate the non-disposable feel of the dishware and the good food you’ll be eating from them. When you’re done with your meal please scrape all leftovers into the garbage and place your plates and utensils in the buckets near the trash.

This is not the only change we’ve made. Styrofoam will not make an appearance at our event. The coffee cups are made of paper. Our soup bowls and drinking cups are 100% recycled fiber, as are the cocktails napkins at the reception this evening. And we’re offering up drinking cups as a small but important sacrifice to the re-use cycle. We’re asking that you not throw these in the trash, but keep them with you to use throughout the day.

In the youth forum yesterday our young people got an important lesson in re-use, too, when their caterer The Cleaver Company provided compostable plates and took them back to be composted after the event.

Water bottles are available today, in part because this facility does not have a sufficient number of drinking fountains. When you pass by one of the few, please refill your bottle or cup. When you find yourself frustrated to not find a fountain, allow yourself to consider the structural limitations that many schools face in their efforts to change their food service and reduce their waste.

It’s easier on the small scale to go around these obstacles, develop innovative practices and jump over the structural constraints. In time this will lead to changes in the very structures we live, learn and work in, to make it easier for all of us to eat better, be healthier, waste less, and teach our kids to do the same.

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