

The reuse outreach playbook

**A manual for conducting reuse
outreach and education at
food businesses**

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and education at food businesses**

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Introduction

Ready to engage restaurants and other food businesses in your neighborhood to encourage their reduction of single-use products and transition to more sustainable reusable foodware?

Many communities across the U.S. are passing ordinances (local policies) that impact food business operations to reduce wasteful and litter prone single-use items while taking steps towards climate goals. For example:

- Requiring reusables for all customers dining in.
- Implementing “[Skip the Stuff](#),” meaning that accessory single-use items like condiments, napkins, straws, etc. are only given upon request.
- Placing a charge on disposables for to-go as a disincentive, modeled after successful bag ban policies around the world, where a small fee is placed on the single-use bag if customers forget their reusable ones. Charges are proven to be more effective at changing behavior than discounts.

- Requiring that new restaurant construction have sufficient dishwashing capacity in order to get permitted.

To learn more about Upstream’s model reuse policies and the support tools you need to develop, pass and implement these policies, check out our [Roadmap to Reuse](#).

To help you talk to businesses about transitioning to reusables – whether it’s to persuade them on the merits, or to help them comply with new requirements – **check out the curated resources and tips contained in this guide!**

Tools for Success

Reusable foodware mini-grants for food business operators

Local governments should set aside a fund for restaurant operators to apply for mini-grants (or rebates) up to \$500 to cover the cost of all-to-some reusable wares to support their transition but may not have the capital to cover these one-time set-up costs. This has proven useful in many communities where operators have taken advantage of the financial assistance that covers a significant number of needed products.



Outreach materials developed by local government agencies

No need to reinvent the wheel! Upstream has curated a library of government outreach materials for food businesses. We suggest that you reach out to that agency to see if they might share an editable version of the file. Since they are a public agency, they lean in to supporting other communities’ efforts on these issues.



[View the library](#)



Fun and Free Apps for positive reviewing and encouraging feedback

If you are feeling techy, then these are good solutions for you! You can use these as an individual, or share them with your followers and encourage their use.

Let's be honest: money speaks to a business, but so do reviews and ratings. **But, let's keep it positive!** Restaurants are struggling to stay open and be successful, especially during the ebb and flow of Covid requirements and challenges in hiring and retaining staff. So, you can either leave positive reviews for a restaurant that is modeling good reuse behavior, or if you see a restaurant that is using too many single-use disposable products (either from your order or what you see piled in the trash cans on the floor) you can take a picture and say *"I love your restaurant and your food. Would you consider using real [insert foodware item(s) here] because I really care about the planet, and I am worried about too much plastic and waste."*

These small nudges from customers can encourage the food operator to do better and learn about good practices more people are coming to expect from businesses.

Yelp's Green Business Attributes. Business owners can add these attributes to their Yelp Page for free by logging into their Yelp for Business account and editing their "Business Information" section. Yelp is also surveying consumers to inform these attributes through the "Update the community" questions on the site's business pages.

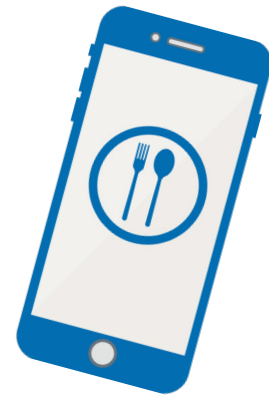
[Learn More](#)

Plastic Score. PlasticScore is a crowdsourced zero waste rating system for restaurants. They also fund the recovery of plastic waste for every sustainability review, and use the data to help restaurants improve.

[Learn More](#)

Remark. Use the app to search for a business, choose where the business got it right and where there's room for improvement. They autogenerate an email to the business decision maker, track whether the business makes a change, and let you know when they do.

[Learn More](#)



I love your restaurant and your food. Would you consider using real dishes? I really care about the planet, and I am worried about too much plastic and waste.

Presentations

Consider making a presentation about the **benefits of reuse to businesses and the community** at a local city council or business chamber or district meeting. Reach out to Upstream (info@upstreamsolutions.org) to access a template presentation called "Train the Trainer" to support you.



Tips for successful in-person engagement

This is a set of guidelines for in-person advocacy, useful for "street teams" doing outreach for nonprofit organizations or government agencies, or even for individuals looking to make a difference in their communities.

1. Restaurant operators are very busy people and it is sometimes difficult to get their attention. **We recommend speaking with the owner/operator during non-peak times**, such as 10-11am in between breakfast and lunch rush, or 2-3pm in between lunch and dinner rush.
2. **Seek out the owner or operator** – in other words, the main decision-maker. Staff or even managers – while running the day to day operations – are typically not able to make big changes like purchasing and implementing reusable packaging. (And, if the owner is not there, usually staff are reluctant to hand out their personal contact information.)

3. **The ideal restaurant to approach is a locally owned and operated business** where the owner is frequently onsite and involved in the business's day-to-day activities.
4. **If the restaurant is a chain, decisions about packaging may come all the way from the top**, and the local franchisee may not have the authority to make packaging changes. This is often because the packaging contains the restaurant's branding, so it may be possible to make changes to other single-use items like utensils, condiments, napkins, and straws.
5. **Try eating there.** You will experience firsthand how the business handles ordering, what single-use packaging they use, and how they handle the waste at the end of the meal.



6. If this is a fine dining restaurant, then in most cases their foodware will already be reusable.

However, oftentimes items like kids' cups are still made from single-use plastic, complete with a lid and straw. These can be subbed out for a real 9 oz cup. Reusable cups for kids may be metal or another durable material (sometimes called "poolware"), and can even have a sippy lid to avoid spills.

7. If there are trash cans in the "front of house," or on the restaurant floor, take a moment to look inside

to determine the contents to the best of your ability. You can even take a few photos for reference. If the majority of the trash, recycling, or even organics are single-use disposables, that information will make for a good conversation starter. Does the customer or do staff bus the tables at the end of service? If customers bus their own waste at the end of a meal, it's recommended that the business remove all waste receptacles from the floor (trash, compost, and recycling), and replace with a rolling cart with bus tubs. This way, staff with the right training can appropriately sort, and fewer reusables will be lost in the trash.

8. If it's a fast casual restaurant, are you eating on all reusables, all disposables, or a mix of the two?

If it is a mix of reusable and disposable, then they likely already have a process in place – and the capacity to manage – the reusable wares. This is a good opportunity to introduce new reusables to fit with the existing infrastructure.

9. If you ordered at the counter, did the staff, without asking, hand you a lid, straw, or other items like napkins and condiment packets?

Or are these items organized at a self-serve station? The latter is better, so that people can take only what they need, but even more ideal is to have such items available only upon request.

10. Does the restaurant use any kind of single-use packets for sweeteners, ketchup, mayo, mustard, salt, pepper, etc.?

These can be easily replaced with bulk dispensers. And instead of giving customers many single-use plastic ramekins for sauces, sauce can be placed directly on the customer's order or at the table.

11. In cafes, businesses can put out bulk dispensers for sweeteners, and instead of using single-use items for stirring beverages, they can offer two cylinders with stir spoons, one labeled "clean" and the other "dirty."

Same goes for ice cream shops that offer tastings. Instead of those single-use plastic spoons, little stainless steel teaspoons with the clean and dirty jars work great, and are easy to throw in a bucket for soaking and sanitizing.

12. When pointing out opportunities for reducing single-use products and transitioning to reusable solutions, offer to conduct research and share product recommendations

based on their needs, style, functionality, cost, etc. Share a variety of options (3-5) for the owner to pick from. You can send the link directly to expedite purchasing. And even offer to help open and set up those reusables if that could support the busy operator in any way.

13. Cafes can also refill customers' own mugs and containers for take-out orders.

Offer and advertise the incentive for a discount to customers. Or consider a customer loyalty program, and every time they BYO, give them a stamp, and the 10th drink is free!

Remember, it may take a few visits or drop-ins at the business before you can really engage the decision-maker. But face-to-face is the best way to form a trusting relationship; calls are less effective, and emails are the least effective.

Face-to-face is the best way to form a trusting relationship.

Making the case for reusables

We have found the following points to be the most convincing for food service operators who aren't yet sure about making the switch. They can also ease worries for those concerned about costs, customer reactions, and difficulty of implementation.

Marketing Toolkit

Be sure to check out these [downloadable social media assets](#) you can share with your followers to increase support and raise awareness about why reusables make the most sense for restaurants by every measure. They contain many of the same points you will find below in an easy-to-digest format.

Reusables help businesses save! Don't throw your money in the trash.

Food service operators tend to use a variety of single-use products because they have just always done things that way, and change can be hard. Many operators care a great deal about how much waste – especially plastic waste – they generate day to day, but have a perception that reusables are cost prohibitive. But the truth is, **businesses pay twice for single-use foodware: first to procure thousands of items weekly, and then to have them hauled away as waste.** That's no good for a business's bottom line.

Even more importantly, data from hundreds of [ReThink Disposable](#) case studies show that making the switch from single-use to reuse for on-site dining ends up saving money – **100% of the time** – even when you take into account the set-up and ongoing costs. Check to see if ReThink Disposable is active in your community. If they aren't, then you can check out their library of dozens of case studies showing substantial savings. Show them to similar types of businesses, so they can see what actions were taken and how those changes impact their bottom line.

* All products and pricing were sourced from [webstaurant.com](#)

With the purchase of around \$500 of reusables, operators reach their ROI in a few short months and can expect to save between \$3,000 – \$22,000 annually – while increasing operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. Switching to reusables need not involve purchasing expensive new equipment. In fact, approximately 50% of businesses implement voluntary reuse solutions without a mechanized dishwasher. We also know that [reusables become cheaper than disposable items](#) after a few uses.*



12 oz glass cup: cheaper than single-use compostable cold cups after just 16 uses

12 oz ceramic mug:

cheaper than single-use compostable hot cups after just 39 uses



9 in ceramic plate: cheaper than single-use compostable plates after just 18 uses

Utensil set: cheaper than single-use plastic sets after just 16 uses



We can demonstrate how similar business types – take a typical taqueria for example – have made an impact through a switch to reusables.

[La Victoria Taqueria in San Jose, California](#). This business has five locations throughout the city, and the owner transitioned to reusable cups and stainless steel utensils for dine-in customers – eliminating 862,000 pieces of plastic over the course of a year, which totals 4 tons of waste. At the same time, the **business owner’s net annual cost savings totaled over \$24,000** when you combine the results from all five locations.

[El Metate in San Francisco](#) transitioned to reusable cutlery and salsa cups. The payback period was less than one month, and after that point, the owner **saved over \$8,000 per year** by eliminating close to 500,000 pieces of single-use plastics.

[Taqueria Viva Mexico in Alameda, CA](#) transitioned to metal sauce cups for the salsa bar to replace all the plastic sauce cups and lids diners used onsite. This one simple change **eliminated over 90,000 pieces of plastic and saved the business owner almost \$1,000 per year**. Product loss, which is a concern with smaller table wares, was very minimal because they affixed signage and removed the trash can off the floor of the restaurant. Diners placed dishes into a bus tub.

You can also check out a business video testimonial, like [Gus’ Tacos in Los Angeles, CA](#).

Considering a shift to reusable products? Check out Upstream’s simple [reuse savings calculator](#) to estimate the cost impact. The calculator page includes a short list of distributors that sell reusable food and tablewares – a resource that can help you identify products and pricing that work for your needs – i.e. cost, function, style, and durability.



Customer Satisfaction

When the pandemic began and take-out and delivery orders skyrocketed, everyone started to take note of the enormous amount of waste generated from packaging in food orders. In today’s climate-conscious world, zero waste matters to consumers. When restaurants take it upon themselves to do better, people take notice, post reviews (using new outlets like Yelp’s Green Attributes), tell their friends, and keep coming back. What’s more, a meal is simply more enjoyable when it’s served on real, rather than disposable, foodware.

Environmental Impact

With the planet in mind, operators try to procure the best foodware options, but that usually involves buying “better” recyclable or compostable alternatives. Single-use foodware of any kind consumes valuable resources and generates global pollution upstream – where the materials were extracted – to manufacturing, transit, and then finally downstream – where too much waste goes to landfill and waterways, or litter is disposed of on our streets. Moreover, many foodware items are not really composted or recycled as they are marketed to be. Reusable foodware is the solution, and beats fiber and plastic single-use alternatives in every environmental measure. For example:

- Replacing disposable cups with reusables can save **16 pounds of solid waste and 281 gallons of water** per day.
- Transitioning to reusables could **reduce trash on our city streets by 67%**
- In just 15 washes, **reusable containers beat out disposables for environmental impacts.**

Learn more about the ways reusables win out over disposables, environmentally and by every other measure, by viewing Upstream’s comprehensive [Reuse Wins Report](#).

And reusables are 100% COVID-safe!

The Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, California’s state and local public health departments, along with scientists across the globe agree: [there is zero risk of transmission of COVID-19 from surface-to-surface contact.](#)



Tips restaurants can implement today

For food service businesses in need of practical advice, this set of suggestions can help them get started right away on their journey to reuse.

- **Don't have space, dishwashing, or the staff to manage washing? Learn more about third-party reuse and dishwashing services** by visiting [Upstream's Reuse Business Directory](#).
- **Your restaurant or school may qualify for financial assistance.** Contact [PlasticFreeRestaurants.org](#) to learn how they subsidize the cost difference between single-use plastics and styrofoam and reusable alternatives.
- **Allow customers to Bring Your Own (BYO) cups and containers** for refilling. Offer and clearly advertise a discount.

- **For take-out orders, check with the customer** before throwing in fistfuls of condiment packets, napkins or utensils (check out [Skip the Stuff](#)). Most diners don't need these items, and they become instant waste.
- **Concerned about dishwashing capacity?** That's common! Purchase enough tableware (ideally 150% of daily average transactions) to cover the lunch or dinner rush, so that sanitizing and washing can happen during lulls between service. Or consider leasing a dishwasher from EcoLab or Auto Chlor. They come in all shapes and sizes to accommodate even the smallest business's back of house.
- **Worried about product loss?** Consider removing the front-of-house trash cans and replacing them with a rolling cart and bus tubs with signage. Or, install a magnetic flatware retriever lid on your trash receptacle to capture any metal utensils accidentally thrown away. This works for front and back of house operations to reduce flatware loss.
- **Communicate your efforts to food service staff and customers** wherever possible – use ample signage at the door, point of sale, tabletops, and waste station.
- **To encourage slowing down and dining in, or reusables for take-out orders,** institute a charge for single-use disposables as a disincentive. It's great if you offer a discount for reuse, but [the charge will motivate the behavior change](#) more than a discount.

Closing/Contact Us

We hope that these resources help you identify and implement reuse solutions at establishments in your community. And remember, you don't have to rip the Band-Aid off all at once! It is okay to try a phased-in approach: take a few actions, normalize it with your staff and customers, and once that feels solid, take the next few actions.

And if you've come up with any new tips and tricks to add to this manual, please contact us at samantha@upstreamolutions.org to submit your ideas!

