



Reusable To-Go Container Pilot Program at a NYC Workplace Cafeteria

March 31, 2020



Who We Are

ThinkReuse was formed in 2018 around a shared passion for reducing food packaging waste. We have more than a decade of combined experience in researching, designing, and implementing reusable take-out container programs for institutional cafeterias and restaurants.



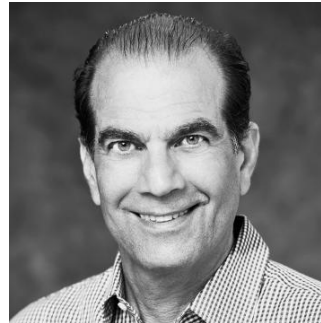
Laura Rosenshine



Meredith Danberg-
Ficarelli



Rich Grousset



Alan Someck



Cait Harrington-Smith



Rich Grousset
rich@thinkreuse.org

Rich is a sustainability consultant and social entrepreneur dedicated to providing consumers and businesses with viable alternatives to wasteful single-use foodservice products. He has conducted extensive research into the restaurant and cafeteria foodservice market segments and has helped launch four reusable to-go container pilot programs in college and workplace cafeterias.

Rich earned his MBA and an MS in Environmental Policy from the University of Michigan in 2013. He also has an MA in Survey Research Methods from the University of Connecticut, a BS in Communication Theory from Cornell University, and is certified by GBCI as a TRUE Zero Waste Business Associate.

**think
REUSE**

Why I Am Here



**CITIZENS COMMITTEE
FOR NEW YORK CITY**



**think
REUSE**

- In 2018, EPA Region 2 awarded a Sustainable Materials Management grant (RFA EPA-SMMS-02-1) to the Citizens Committee for New York City (CCNYC) to pilot a reusable to-go container program in an NYC workplace cafeteria.
- Citizens Committee contracted ThinkReuse consultants to execute the grant.
- Rich Grousset manages the project, which was scheduled to wrap up in March 2020.
- Learned valuable lessons about organizational sustainability initiatives.



Today's Agenda

- 1) Set the stage (<5 minutes)
 - a) Define disposable foodservice wares
 - b) The problems with disposables
 - c) Reusable to-go models and examples
 - d) Why workplace cafeterias make good starting points
 - e) Goals of the EPA grant
- 2) Approach and key learnings (>10 minutes)
 - a) Finding a pilot site
 - b) Results to date
 - c) Encouraging participation
- 3) What's Next



Foodservice Disposables Defined

“Disposable foodservice wares” generally refers to any single-use disposable products used by a food provider for serving or transporting prepared, ready-to-consume food or beverages including, but not limited to, *plates, cups, bowls, trays, utensils, napkins, straws, lids, hinged or lidded containers, wraps, and bags.*



Image Source: [WCP Solutions](#)

Typical use cases:

- On-premise or “dine in”
- Off-premise
 - Takeout (“to-go,” “takeaway”)
 - Delivery
 - Drive thru

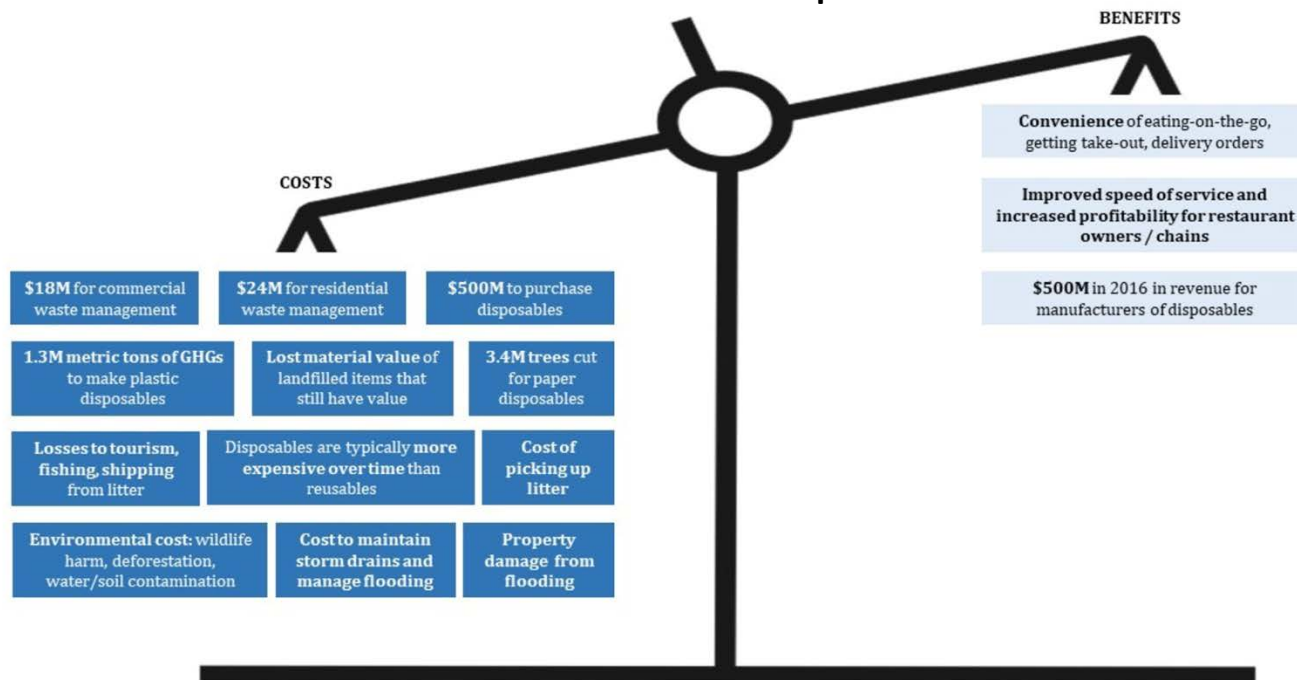
NOT included in this definition is “packaging” for food items not prepared on site, such as beverage cans and bottles or grocery store food packaging.

The Problem with Foodservice Disposables

Costs and Benefits of Foodservice Disposables in NYC³

The U.S. market for foodservice disposables is estimated to be **\$24.8 billion**, which is a **30% increase from 2016**.¹

That equates to more than **700 billion disposable items per year**.²



¹ [Freedonia Group](#)

² Calculation based on estimate provided in "[The Dirty Truth About Disposable Foodware](#)"

³ "[The Dirty Truth About Disposable Foodware](#)"



Reusable Models and Examples

Model	Description	Benefits	Challenges	Examples
Bring Your Own	Users bring reusable cups or containers to FSEs, perhaps receiving a discount	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimizes burden on FSEs• User freedom to select preferred style	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scalability doubtful due to behavioral burden on users• Health and safety concerns• Compatibility w/ restaurant equipment• User containers may not match FSE portion sizes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Just Salad• Huskee Cup• Starbucks
Exchange	FSEs or 3rd party providers provide users with clean containers at POS, collect them, and wash them. Users typically charged subscription fee or deposit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scalability due to minimal behavioral burden on user• Health and safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collection and cleaning infrastructure• Economics not proven at scale• User charges may inhibit adoption• Accessibility depends on payment method and accountability technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Go Box• Canteen by Dig• Cup Club• DeliverZero

think REUSE

Workplace Cafeterias as Pilot Sites

Workplace cafeterias comprise only about 1% of NYC foodservice establishments (FSEs), but in theory they are an excellent choice for piloting reusable to-go container programs.

- “Closed” systems
- Captive user audience
- Single foodservice provider
- On-site dishwashing capacity
- Pay for waste hauling
- Sustainability goals
- Potential to be neighborhoods hubs for reusable programs
- Marketing and communication budgets



Image Source: [BHDP](#)



Objectives of the EPA Grant

Reusable to-go container programs are not new to the college campuses or workplace cafeterias, but an app-based accountability system is.

Our **objectives** include:

- Test effectiveness of app-based accountability system
- User and stakeholder feedback
- Identify and measure key outcomes
- Develop replicable model
- Create toolkit
- Share learnings

Overall, we seek to advance the discussion of if and how reusable programs can be successful.



Finding a Partner Site

Criteria:

- Commercial office building
- Closed to public
- 1000 or more meals per day
- Dishwashing capacity

Goals:

- Complete 10 meetings with potential sites within the first two months of outreach
- Select a site by the end of the third month

Approach:

- Develop desired site criteria
- Create marketing materials
- Focus outreach efforts on our networks
- Publicize through like-minded organizations

Results:

- Contacted approximately 60 people to get to 40 sites
- Five on-site meetings
- Seven conference calls
- Six months to secure partner



Learnings from Outreach

Benefits we focused on:

- Potential cost savings
- Waste reduction
- Data
- Employee engagement
- Publicity

What we learned about motivations:

- Interests varied
- Competition / publicity
- Cost savings
- “Piloting” not appealing to some
- Timing

What we learned about the market:

- Few sites with 1000+ meals per day
- Dishwashing capacity limited
- Foodservice operated by 3rd parties
- Self-checkout is new trend

Why made A+E a good choice?

- They said "yes"
- The right people
 - Authority
 - Well connected and respected
 - Problem solvers
 - Interest in sustainability
- Dishwashing capacity
- Timing
 - Refreshing café concept
 - Seeking ways to increase café visitation

Our concerns:

- Small size of operation



The Program at A+E Networks

How It Works

Getting Started

- User downloads free GoBox app
- Creates a Go Box account (refer to the guide we've provided)
- Provides credit card information (card never charged unless user fails to return container)

Checking out a container

- Open the app, type in the four-digit code at the cafe food station, show cafe staff the “Good to Go” screen to have food served in a reusable container
- May have up to two containers checked out at any given time

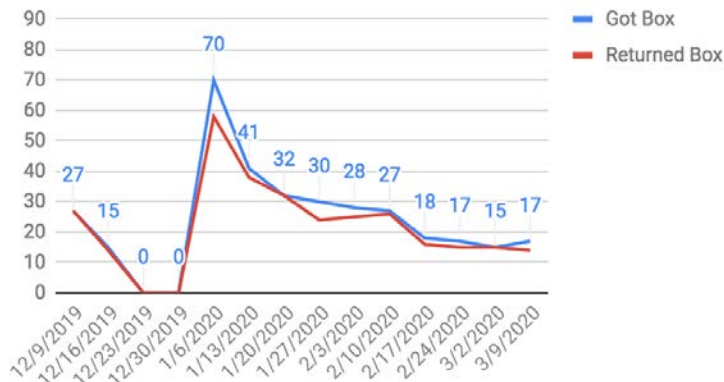
Returning a container

- Open the Go Box app, scan the QR code on a designated return bin, and drop in the container
- Containers collected at end of day, washed by kitchen staff and stocked for reuse

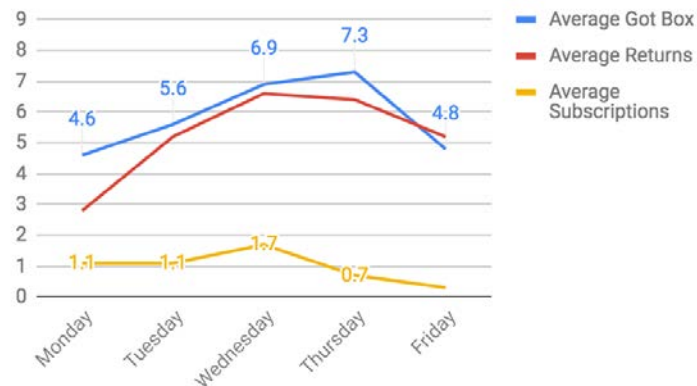
From December 9, 2019 to March 12, 2020:

- 337 total container checkouts
- 28 checkouts per week on average
- 56 subscriptions
- 80% of new subscriptions occurred in first 3 weeks
- ~30 “missing” containers

Weekly Container Checkouts



Average Daily Activity



Learning How to Encourage Participation

Pre-Launch

- Internal website
- Email to select groups
- Sign up list
- Training materials

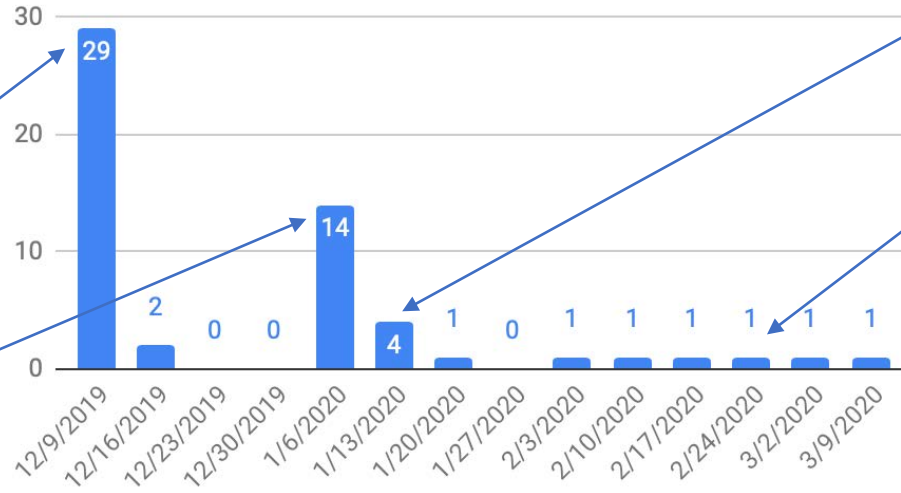
Soft Launch

- Email to select groups
- Tabling
- Cafeteria displays
- Personal interactions

Launch

- Café refresh messaging
- Building-wide email
- Tabling
- Cafeteria displays
- Personal interactions

Weekly New Subscriptions



Week 2

- Building-wide email
- Cafeteria displays

Week 8

- Waste Lunch 'N Learn



What's Next

After the “pause”:

- Introduce additional containers (soup / oatmeal)
- "Sign up a friend" promotion

Wrapping up the project:

- Stakeholder feedback
 - User survey
 - Non-user interviews
 - Staff interviews
- Final report
- Case study
- Toolkit



Thank you!

Please feel free to send me an email for additional details or with any questions not covered today!

rich@thinkreuse.org