

Sustainable Success Reports

from the St. Louis Green Business Challenge

Green Practice Serves Up Benefits For Russo's Catering

By Jean Ponzi

When patriarch and company founder Matthew Russo set up shop in 1961, could he have imagined the business advantage of coupling catering to recycling, solar power and composting?

His son Mark Russo, the firm's current President, added a sustainable-thinking cap to the many operational hats he wears. He confirms that Russo's Green efforts support family values as well as business plans: growing into new trends while maintaining both fine food and service traditions.

Most of the Green updates work behind the scenes of Russo's bustling offices, commissary and Café, located at 9904 Page Avenue in Overland, but these efforts are also increasingly showcased at the company's own four banquet locations and in over 50 regional venues that Russo's Catering serves.

"You deal with so much waste in our business," says Mark Russo, "from packaging to unused product. The amount of waste can make you crazy – or you can rise to the challenge of reducing it. We have a long-standing relationship with Operation Food Search, donating both unused ingredients and prepared food when we have overruns or an event cancellation. It means a lot to us to help people directly.

"Sustainability is helping us too. Russo's has been a proud member of the St. Louis Regional Chamber for years, so when the Chamber launched the Green Business Challenge, we jumped at the chance to learn ways to chip away at our various waste streams. Along the way, we've attracted new customers from our fellow Challenge companies, and developed the capability to meet increasing public expectations for specialized services like Green weddings and parties featuring locally produced foods."

Sustainable office practices include conversion to electronic contracts and invoicing, and programming copiers for double-sided printing. "We distribute detailed event sheets to six departments at our weekly production meetings," Russo reports. "We used to print out a packet for everybody for each event. Now our copier can produce double-sided booklets that are more efficient to handle. Overall, we've cut our use of copy paper by 50%. That's a healthy cost-cut!

"We've also converted to 50% post-consumer recycled content copy paper, and we recycle all our office paper, through DMT Shredding. They're another local business and the 'official document management company of the St. Louis Cardinals.' Their recycling boxes say, 'when you fill this container, you save half a tree!'

"Recycling's now the norm in our food-prep and serving areas too. Staff training includes what and how to recycle: cardboard and carrier stock boxes, glass bottles and jars, food and beverage cans, and all kinds of plastic containers. Recycling was a stretch at first for some of us, but now it's routine."

Russo's tapped the expertise of another St. Louis company, BioLogix, to convert to using Green cleaning products. "We even switched our heavy-duty degreasers," Russo reports. "The Green formulas are enzyme-based. They keep our drains clean, cut toxic exposure for our employees and the environment, and perform as well or better than conventional chemical product lines, for both kitchen and rest room maintenance."

Business decisions often involve the entire Russo family, including Mark's brothers and fellow managers Tom, Mike and John (recently retired), and their mother Fran – who, at 85, still greets Café guests daily. They proudly point out their new 25 kW solar power system, financed in part by utility rebates and tax credits. This investment was coupled with conversion to CFL and LED lighting.

"We'd been learning about energy-saving options in Green Challenge meetings, recalls Russo, "and we started out just deciding to paint our black roof white, to help keep the building cooler. But when we ran the solar and lighting numbers, we invested in the whole package. We're seeing a \$300-400 monthly savings on our electric bills."

The Russo's Catering sustainable goals list includes kitchen composting of food-prep organic waste. The obstacle, as with many food-based businesses located on tight properties, is limited space to add another collection system into storage and delivery areas.

"We'll continue to work toward a Greener operation," Mark Russo states, "and continue to promote our premium services. We know we have the support we need to tackle any Green improvements, as a participant in the St. Louis Green Business Challenge!"

The St. Louis Green Business Challenge, a joint program of the St. Louis Regional Chamber and the Missouri Botanical Garden, delivers "triple bottom-line" results (financial, social and environmental) to businesses across the St. Louis Region. The Challenge's scorecard of strategies and customized service helps companies "Green up" everyday practices in ways that work for each participant's goals, type of business, and workplace culture. This column is funded in part by the St. Louis-Jefferson Solid Waste Management District and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.



All food prepared in Russo's "Trucktoria" is served on compostable ware, deliciously taking Green to the streets!

Learn more at www.stlouisgreenchallenge.com