

Opportunities in Concessions and the Back of House to #BuildBackBetter



Concessions

Whether you're a classic fan that enjoys a stadium hot dog or prefer to scout out an offering unique to your team's stadium, food and beverage are chief to many fans' game day experience.

When it comes to a fan getting their hands on game day food and drink there are two leading concerns: crowding and high-frequency touchpoints. How many people will you be in close proximity with while getting your food/beverage items?

Is there a way for fans to easily wash or sanitize their hands before consuming their food? In actuality, stadiums and concessionaires have been working for a while on issues of long lines and wait times as a customer service and sales measure. The focus of these solutions will now shift to -- or at least also include -- health and safety and be pursued with a new sense of urgency. Accelerating the transition to app-based ordering and cashless transactions can decrease interaction instances/times between food service staff and fans and reduce lines and crowding around food and beverage outlets. We'll probably see an influx of in-seat delivery in areas where space allows but does not require passing items down the line.



According to an April 2020 [FanFood Survey](#), while the majority of fans (62.06%) report they will still order concessions at a game, there will need to be options alternative to the status quo stands and booths. 10.31% of fans said they will order concessions and eat ahead of the game, and 10.94% said they will order and eat during the game only if there's contactless pickup options available. When asked by FanFood what services venues should have to create a safe and clean environment, 87.4% of fans surveyed think venues should have more sanitation stations beyond existing bathrooms. The second most requested measure by 67.81% of the respondents is food and drink mobile ordering for contactless pickup, followed closely by having an active cleaning crew on concourses.

In an effort to replace the stadium-hawker and further reduce lines, there may be an inclination for stadiums to increase “grab and go” stations with pre-packaged and bottled items. Is solutions like this silver bullets or sources of new stadium concerns?

When evaluating options for coronavirus-safe food and beverage operations, it is important to note that, while experts are still learning about the spread and transfer of COVID-19, as of June 5th [the CDC states](#) that while it “may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes... this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads”. [According to epidemiologist Ben Locwin](#), your chances of getting the virus from surfaces are “virtually nil”. So, while all efforts should be taken to sanitize surfaces, greater emphasis can be placed on maintaining distance between people and promoting the practices of hand washing and not touching the face.

This is not to say that opportunities to reduce touchpoints and surface contact should not be considered when it makes the most overall sense. These actions can only be positive in preventing the spread of all types of germs, not just COVID-19. However, it is important to look at the costs, benefits, and actual risk at the time of evaluating operation changes. It is also important to note that a lot of decisions will be based on fan sentiment. How can we make fans most comfortable while maintaining or advancing our sustainability efforts?



**Q: CAN COVID-19 SPREAD
THROUGH CONTACT WITH
PRODUCT SURFACES?**



A: Your chances of getting the virus from surfaces are "virtually nil" (Dr. Ben Locwin, epidemiologist)

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"We haven't had a confirmed case of contact transmission of COVID-19 since this has all been occurring."

-DR. BEN LOCWIN
EPIDEMIOLOGIST
CDC CONSULTANT

#INDISPOSABLE

While there are many factors of sustainability touched by concessions, the one most noticeably at risk is waste. According to the National Hot Dog and Sausage Council, more than 18 million hot dogs are consumed by fans during one full Major League Baseball season. Imagine if stadiums that usually serve condiments from bulk dispensers responded by instead serving condiments in the old-school, individually pre-packaged sachets. There are now millions of non-recoverable single-use wrappers to deal with and send to landfill.

Waste reduction principles focus first on reduction of waste, then reuse, and then recycling and compost as a last resort before sending the minority of non-recoverable materials to landfill -- which many stadiums have proven can make up less than 10% of the waste stream. While responding to COVID-19, we should continue to first look for solutions to reduce the amount of concessions-related waste. However, in the cases where an increase in packaging is deemed necessary, it does not have to mean an increase in landfill-bound waste -- if the appropriate facilities are locally available.



Packaging

Will switching to grab-and-go items and/or bottled beverages solve all the problems without creating new ones?

Serving pre-packaged food and bottled beverages “convenience store” style may be necessary to reduce crowding around concession stands, but this also increases the surface area in need of constant cleaning during events.

Stadiums must also consider the increased power requirements for more refrigeration, space for storage of product, and lower ROI on bottled beverages versus fountain drinks. For stadiums without the energy supply necessary to refrigerate these items (many collegiate stadiums), this would also increase the need for ice, which often comes in bags. Whether you increase your use of packaged ice due to COVID-19 or not, if your stadium does not already have a back-of-house plastic bags and films recovery program in place, this could be the time to implement.

When choosing any type of packaging, for existing products or new, work with your waste hauler and material recovery facilities to determine which packaging options are preferred. Keep in mind that in current waste recovery conditions, unless a plastic item is shaped like a bottle, the chances it gets recycled are slim.

Should we replace the condiment/cutlery station with individually-packaged items?

Instead of reverting away from bulk and unpackaged items, there is an opportunity for innovation in delivery systems.

We have automatic, touchless soap dispensers, why not the same for condiments? While there doesn't seem to be a touchless dispenser publicly on the market, there should be soon. A quick Google search shows an existing patent for one concept and a forward-thinking student group from Tougaloo College came up with a design and marketing plan for such a product in Spring of 2019.

And no need to go back to individually wrapping cutlery. While we'd like to say that finger foods are the best bet as they eliminate the need for cutlery and therefore this item, fans wanting to eat with their hands will probably not be the go-to option. The Eco-Products Cutlerease dispenses BPI-certified compostable forks, spoons, and knives one piece at a time with no contact required.

What if touchless isn't an option?

It is very important to recognize that condiment packaging is a particularly troubling material for zero waste systems. Not only can existing options not be recycled or composted, but when used they are a main contaminant found in compost and recycle bins. Avoiding these items not only reduces landfill-bound waste but reduces risk of contamination and need for removal (hand sorting) from recycling and compost streams.

By Request

It's not unlikely that some items move behind-the-counter to avoid "restaurant mint jar" perceptions. While it may slightly increase pick-up or service time, concessions staff can pump condiments from a bulk dispenser into a paper cup by request.

App-based order systems should include condiment requests so condiments can be pumped accordingly before pick-up or delivery. Straws are another good item to make available only by request as implementation has shown that this small change drastically reduces waste while also saving supply costs. Lids and napkins are additional candidates to be considered for request only, though will need to be balanced against other facility cleaning concerns.

Serviced stations

With fewer cashiers needed as stadiums shift to app-based ordering and advance robotic food prep operations, concession jobs can be saved by adding roles as service station attendants and/or sanitation specialists. These staff members could staff and/or wipe down and sanitize places like condiment/cutlery stations, public-facing soda fountains, and possibly even water-refill stations.





If you must use packaged

While step one should always be to reduce the creation of waste in the first place, in the right systems, more packaging does not have to mean more landfill-bound waste. Now might be the time to support packaging innovation such as Ooho, a flexible packaging that claims to be a plastic free solution to wasteful sauce pots and condiment sachets.

NOTE: Before adding any recoverable packaging to your streams, work with your recyclers and composters to determine if they will take the material. The minimum requirement for compostable items will be BPI certification, which the Ooho packaging does not appear to have - yet.

A note to stadiums without access to commercial-scale composting:

It is important to examine and work with the local waste recovery infrastructure when choosing materials that will end up in a recovery stream. This applies for recyclables and compostables. When available, sanitary reusable systems can eliminate the need for recycling or composting of certain waste items. In the absence of a reusable option, as well as recycling and/or composting options, still consider the materials you choose. Are the service items made with recycled content? Are they certified by a third-party such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)? Are they made with renewable resources (aka plant-based)? Is the company a certified B-Corp? Honestly, you'll be hard pressed to find an item that meets all of the criteria questioned, but there will be an option that is more sustainable and aligns best with your venue's system and values.

See the waste handling section for additional notes to stadiums without access to commercial-scale composting.



Beverages

Will nixing or not considering refill systems be a safer move?

To build back better, r.Cup - a Fast Company Most Innovative Company focused on reuse systems - has introduced a reuse model called “New Cup Every Time.” In this program, r.Cup delivers locally washed, sterilized and packed reusable cups to the venue. Guests are served in the r.Cup and when finished they drop the cup into a collection receptacle. A new reusable cup is offered with every beverage purchase. At the end of an event, the r.Cup collection receptacles are taken off site and the cups are washed, sterilized and repacked for the next event. Guests are offered the same system of service as they would with a disposable cup and the stadium service staff employs all the standard systems as they would with a single use model.

Should we eliminate our water fountains?

We hope not. Instead, consider this as the time to upgrade your water fountains to touchless refill stations. For extra precaution, water fountain/refill station sanitation should take place before, after, and throughout the event. It will depend on your property’s division of labor and responsibility, as well as what will be most efficient, but this can be a task added to the sanitation duties of custodial, concessions, green team, or other operational groups. To reduce hydration station crowding and promote social distancing, apply signage to the unit and install queuing markers on the surrounding floor area. You may have also just created new sponsorship assets!



Food Recovery

A great way to reduce waste and make a positive community impact is through food recovery. Many stadiums and events work with a partner to recover un-served surplus food and get it to communities and people in need. This is the preferred treatment for surplus food, even if composting is available, as it creates the most benefit for society, the environment, and the economy. Food recovery professionals are trained to follow FDA standards for safe recovery and should be additionally trained to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Healthy Food Options

Diet-related disorders such as Type 2 diabetes, obesity-related cancers, and cardiovascular disease increase a person's vulnerability to Covid-19. Even without a global pandemic, these and other harmful effects of poor nutrition have an overall negative impact on the health of individuals and society as a whole. Teams and concessionaires have an opportunity to promote general health and resilience among fans by making appealing healthy food options available during events.

For some fans, the promotion of safety precautions plus additional preventative health factors taken into account with healthy food options may be a way to entice concerned fans back to dining at an event.

Back of House: Anticipating an Increase in Total Waste

During the March 2020 COVID-19 shutdown, organizations, local governments, and individuals were scrambling to find every possible way to avoid the virus transmission. Though sometimes unavoidable, people in the U.S. nearly halted any exchange of physical goods. As research on how long the virus will live on surfaces and whether or not it can be transmitted through these mediums continues to emerge, consumers continue to lean on the potentially misunderstood comfort that single-use plastic wrapping, packaging, and containers seems to provide.

Reusable shopping bags were an early fatality of the shutdown. In a quick attempt to avoid one method of transferring germs, state governors lifted plastic bag bans and in some cases, even prohibited reusable bags. Though particular activist groups have fought against these knee-jerk reactions, the bags aren't the only hesitation of consumers. Potential virus transmission is a concern of many industries and is currently being addressed with strategies that hinder the progress of waste diversion from landfill.

In sports, many operations teams plan to shift to disposable products, coverings, packaging, and protective gear which will negatively impact waste diversion commitments while also raising waste hauling expenses and ultimately increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Not to mention that the decision for the switch is largely a misconception, and will end up creating more confusion by system users.

The results from this reaction will add up quickly. New York City just suspended their city-wide food waste collection program, which diverted thousands of tons of waste from landfill. Even stadiums that recently banned plastic straws are discussing the possibility of their temporary return, just to appease the concern of an open container. After all of our progress to instituting zero waste programs, mandating plastic straw bans, setting up food waste diversion practices and the like, the industry cannot allow Coronavirus to be the challenge that we do not overcome.

As organizations anticipate and respond to potential implications, this hiatus presents the opportunity to integrate zero waste best practices, reconfigure dumpster and waste compactor locations, upgrade signage, and educate staff on new policies and procedures.



Waste Handling

In sports and live events, waste diversion is one of the more visible elements of sustainability practices. Though most of the collection points are fan-facing, the way the waste is handled behind the scenes is really the critical point for progress in landfill diversion.

Municipal waste sanitation crews across the US are now burdened with heavier, larger loads, as more people are at home are consuming single-use products and packaging. As sports return, gameday sanitation crews expect a similar story. If holistic impact is not considered during decision making, these essential staff behind the scenes may see an increase in total waste and may also be burdened with new waste material, such as disposable PPE, not previously common to a live event venue's waste haul.

These essential staff, who are sometimes volunteers, often handle this waste directly, hand-picking specific waste streams to separate recyclables and compostables when they can. COVID-19 presents heightened concerns of exposure and the risks of virus transmission are in the forefront of everyone's mind. To reduce these hazards, waste handling protocol must establish the following strategies, in order of priority.

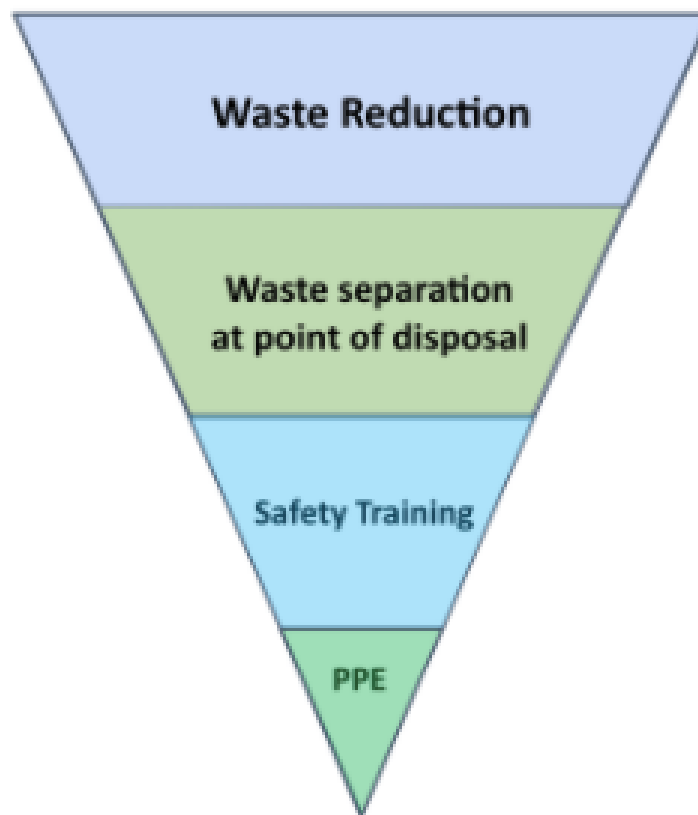
In addition, reduced capacity and capabilities of recycling and compost facilities, a symptom of the market experienced before the Covid-19 outbreak, further solidify the importance of reduced, albeit clean material streams coming out of venues.

Reduction in Waste

Reduction in Waste To protect these essential employees, it is critical that the first priority in waste handling is to reduce waste at its source. Put simply, if waste is never generated, there is nothing to divert from landfill. As stadiums fill back up and safety protocols are established, it is critical to weigh all implications of the decisions that are made, including potential waste generated. This risk is flagged in other components of the #BuildBackBetter Opportunities, including in Concessions and in Gameday Logistics.

For example, beverage containers, a well-known primary contributor to gameday waste, can be substituted for a reusable option, which has also been sanitized with the same effectiveness as a plate in a restaurant. At just 15 concerts during one tour, r.Cup's reusable cup program eliminated 60,000 disposable plastic cups.

Post-COVID Waste Diversion Protocol Hierarchy



Fan Behavior

Bins/Waste Stations

Some successful zero waste programs use a two-bin system for fan-facing waste collection - recycle and compost. Even without a change in packaging, disposable PPE brought in by fans will warrant the addition of a third, landfill-bound bin. Some zero waste managers argue this is a better practice under any circumstance because it more accurately mimics the real world outside of the stadium.

By adding a landfill bin there is an increased risk of lost recyclable and/or compostable material. Whether or not landfill bins were already in place, a desire to reduce contact time with waste material, and therefore associated contamination correction procedures, highlights the importance of effective tactics to guide fan behavior.

Signage

In this hiatus, many venues are leveraging this moment to identify strategies to reconfigure and implement more effective, efficient policies and procedures. Though the success of these procedures often occurs in the back of house, many operations teams are actively identifying ways to communicate those changes with fans. Signage is an effective way to share messages, provide simple instructions, and has been a critical point to successful waste diversion practices.

As venues design, order, and install new signage, consider integrating signage that instructs fans to separate their waste at the points of disposal. Some signage best practices to encourage proper separation of material are to place signs at eye-level and customize them with the specific materials used at your event. Fans can often be seen comparing what is in their hand with the items pictured on a waste station sign. If space allows, use images and simple, descriptive words

Brand and design standards often limit what can be done with waste station signage, as do location of bins in places where there is nowhere to affix an eye-level sign. Given new circumstances, this is an opportunity to rethink these limitations and, for new stadiums in particular, design for success in waste management.

A holistic approach to materials management can ease the pressure on signage by designing the material system to be as simple as possible. A practice linked to material selection that can simplify signage and messaging is using all recyclable containers for liquids and compostable containers for food and food-related items.

While signage is important and effective there are some fans who will overlook the signage or misinterpret the procedure, given what else they see in the bin. This highlights the importance of communication/education outside of bin signage as well as maintaining clean streams throughout the event which, on many college campuses and at annual events, is done with waste station attendants and/or the practice of top-sorting.

Communications

Fan engagement with materials management is now even more of an operational need. Stadiums already play sportsmanship and safety messages, and proper disposal of waste material is no exception to these sentiments. Options available to marketing teams range in scale from allotting screen/PA time for a simple PSA to fully baked sustainable behavior change campaigns. Messaging should emphasize to fans what items go where as a way to decrease the need for hands-on management on the back end.

As organizations grapple with the logistics of planning and financing these new practices, brand partners may be a helpful resource. In many cases, team sponsors possess their own corporate responsibility commitments, including waste diversion goals. This may be a path for a mutually beneficial partnership, which ultimately protects back of house staff, engages with fans, and institutes positive impact.





Safety Training & PPE

Unfortunately, even if we successfully reduce and better separate waste at the points of disposal, waste streams may not be the same as pre-COVID. Top-sorting practice should involve additional training and documentation, and may also require continuous updates, as the full set of COVID-19 response procedures roll out.

It is critical that, even when other recommendations are implemented successfully, gameday and post-game operations staff are trained on new **health and safety protocol**. This protocol should be largely shaped by recommendations by the CDC and WHO and will include strict requirements for PPE, handwashing, and sanitation procedures. Even where staff has always been required to wear some PPE and follow health and safety regulations, the virus has now put increased attention on the health risk and associated liability.

In some instances, additional PPE and an emphasis on sanitary behaviors like hand washing and avoiding contact with the face can help further mitigate risk associated with handling event-waste material. A trending program from [ISSA's Global Biorisk Advisory Council](#) is the GBAC Star Accreditation Program. This provides a model that can help venues assess risk, plan, document, and implement practices for continuous improvement and documentation to safeguard the safety of the environment for visitors and employees.

A note to stadiums without access to commercial-scale composting:

Unfortunately, access to effective and viable options to recover the large amount of materials generated at a sporting event is not something available in all communities. This is especially true for commercial-scale, post-consumer composting. However, the ability to divert any portion of your food-related waste from landfill will dramatically improve the sustainability-efforts of your overall operation. Alternative options for those dedicated to achieving zero waste include managing back-of-house food waste onsite with an [in-vessel composter](#) or exploring options to divert all food-related waste, including packaging, by [partnering with a local university or farm](#) if it is appropriate for your area.

Custodial Services

For better or for worse, COVID-19 has highlighted the demanding, sometimes thankless role of many 'Essential' workers. Custodial Services, oftentimes an 'invisible' Essential workforce, has been brought to the Front of House as coronavirus has increased the demand for continuous sanitation. Custodial service teams at sports venues are tasked with pre-game and post-game preparation, requiring long hours of low-paying physically demanding work. During the hiatus in live sports, this virus has also resulted in devastating layoffs and furloughs for many of these teams.

In addition to the long hours and unequal pay, Custodial workers also face physical risks by using the cleaning products themselves. Traditional sanitizing products are often made with harmful chemicals, including toxic synthetic fragrances, bleach and 95% of them are made from petroleum, which is shown to alter hormones and cause issues such as cancers, neurological disorders, weakening of the immune system, learning disabilities, allergies, infertility and more.

In recent years, the movement towards 'Green Cleaning' has gained traction, thanks to GreenSeal, the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED Building Standard, and many other best practices and building certifications. **However, in a rapid response to the COVID-19 crisis, many of the Green Cleaning programs were substituted with more harmful chemicals, in an attempt to most forebly address the virus.** The excuses for this switch often include, 'It needs to smell clean to reassure visitors that it's been clean,' 'Bleach will kill the virus more effectively than the green cleaning products.' **Will we allow this substitution misconception become a mainstay in future venue operations?**

Many of these assumptions are actually misconceptions and may be more harmful than the green cleaning practices. Not only do the cleaning products add more risk to the custodial services demanding job, but they also devastate the environment and most importantly do not more effectively kill the virus, confirmed by third-party certification system GreenSeal. Solutions for high-touch surfaces, the areas that demand this rigorous cleaning, are widely being discussed. Jani-King, a Green Sports Alliance member and active green cleaning supporter, highlights the critical touchpoints for public restrooms. Notably, simple technologies exist to convert several of these high-touch surfaces into touchless surfaces, including sinks, faucets, paper towels, soap, and toilet flush handles. A recent study confirms that over 90% of respondents flagged touchless restroom equipment as either extremely or somewhat important.



Additional resources on this topic:

Angie Gilbert, Associate Manager of Remote Sustainability, ESPN; Zero Waste Program Manager, University of Colorado

Lauren Lichterman, sports sustainability consultant, formerly University of Texas Athletics



SUSTAINABLE SPORT
RESEARCH COLLECTIVE

Sustainable Sport Research Collective is a collaboration among 4 established sustainability professionals exclusively focused on the sports industry. With strong knowledge of venue operations, environmental sustainability, social responsibility and fan experience and engagement, the group recognized the need for insights into fans' primary concerns, and latent trepidation, in returning to large public gathering spaces. As advisors and practitioners working regularly with sports league and team executives, we've established a robust survey method, including a novel virtual focus group, representative of the broad demographics of sports fans.

Sustainable Sport Research Collective Members:

Aileen McManamon, Founder of 5T Sports

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