

The art of upcycling, recycling and smart hospitality

By  Avukile Mabombo

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What do single-use straws and used bedding have in common? Both contribute to waste on the part of hospitality businesses, only the former is a contributor to a global pollution challenge, while the latter is more of a nuisance in terms of disposal. There are, however, many novel ways in which hotels and restaurants can upcycle, recycle and reduce waste - a theme that can be adopted by businesses as part of a holistic sustainability strategy.



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There's been a global shift away from providing single-use straws for drinks, since these are notoriously useless for recycling purposes. Many establishments have stopped using them, and this has led to some ingenious replacement products, such as paper straws that are easily biodegradable and other alternatives with an enduring lifespan made out of glass, steel and even wood. This small step towards sustainable business has prompted people to take a closer look at other means of smarter sustainability.

Your old linen is someone else's resource

Hotels have a vast supply of linen, from quality cotton bedding like sheets, duvet covers and pillowcases, to tablecloths and hand towels. In hospitality, it's necessary to ensure that this quality isn't ever presented to guests in a compromised state, so there are frequent repurchases of these items, but what happens to the old linen? It's rarely sold on and is occasionally donated to some relevant NPO.

A fresh approach came to us recently, when Josie Lyons developed the creative idea of turning this linen into fantastic clothing. Bear in mind that it's high-quality cotton, so it's durable. This initiative has partnered with an NPO called Royal Kidz, who convert the linen into usable items of clothing and homeware which will be sold to raise funds to purchase school uniforms for impoverished schools in the Ceres area of the Western Cape, with plans afoot to expand the initiative to other areas, potentially across Africa.

In some cases, hotels have addressed the sustainability challenge by removing single-use linen napkins from lavatories and tables, as well as linen tablecloths. This doesn't compromise on the visitor experience in any way, but it does reduce the need to do endless loads of laundry. It's a water saving that's part of a wider water-friendly hospitality experience. They're also using leftover water from conferences to mop floors, for example, and aren't providing water in sealed plastic bottles, but in refillable glass bottles.

Addressing sustainability challenges

It's essential in hospitality to provide a first-class environment when it comes to hygiene, but this should be done in conjunction with weighing up alternatives to using resources that are hard to recycle or ones that place a heavy load on water and other resource usages.

The water shortages in Cape Town, for example, have prompted some fantastic responses from hotels; some are tapping into alternative water sources, while others are reviewing how their swimming pools and green areas (gardens, pot plants) are managed. On the whole, guests are appreciative of efforts being made and are happy to go along with any measures put in place. In this case, it's not just a nice option, it's an essential state of being.

In kitchens, there's plenty of waste that goes on, but sourcing from local suppliers can reduce this, whether in reducing the carbon load that comes with having food delivered from great distances or from the packaging that needs to get dumped.

Some hotels have the space to grow local produce, while others reach out to local suppliers. One hotel, in particular, the African Pride Arabella Hotel & Spa, Autograph Collection, has its own on-site butchery, but more than just using that for the regular kinds of meat guests enjoy, executive chef Louis van Reenen goes one step further by incorporating the cuts of meat that some people may find unusual: pig's cheeks, offal, beef tongue. That means less waste. He is restricting other items – fish, for instance, is no longer a menu standard because of the shortages – and these are the kinds of efforts that play a role in reducing the hotel's environmental footprint.

This sustainability challenge should never be seen as a movement to be begrudged, it can provide endless opportunities for creativity and ingenuity.

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