Stakeholder Interviews

University of Richmond Dining Services

Joe Wolff, Director of Catering

As the Director of Catering, Joe Wolff coordinates the strategic goals of the Catering Department on campus from the highest managerial level. He has been a proponent of more sustainable practices throughout his 40 years in the dining industry, such as introducing boxed water to catering’s offerings and incentivizing patrons to reduce waste. Wolff champions redirecting demand for SPB at the beginning of the pipeline, rather than attempting to deal with the effects of SPB consumption at the end of the bottles’ life cycle.

Wolff sees the Boxed Water Is Better boxed water as a palatable, equivalent product to SPB for consumers who want a limited-quantity, resealable container for water at an event. Because the cardboard container is biodegradable and recyclable, the post-consumption product has more avenues besides the landfill. In addition, the Boxed Water Is Better brand donates 1% of all revenues to sustainable initiatives. According to the Boxed Water Is Better website, boxed water has a 64% lower carbon footprint and 43% less fossil fuel use than plastic water bottles.¹ Boxed Water Is Better claims that its product has a 64% lower carbon footprint, 43% less fossil fuel use, and 1,084% lower impact on the ozone layer than bottled water. Additionally, it claims its superiority to aluminum cans through a 50% lower impact on ozone depletion and smog emissions, and a 33% lower impact on acidification due to deforestation.²

Unlike the 12 oz. Dasani bottle, the boxed water comes in a 8.5 oz. size, which Wolff says has been anecdotally praised as a more reasonable quantity for events such as symposiums. In January 2020, Catering will begin to offer both plastic and boxed water for the same per bottle price—$1.20 each—so that customers will not be disincentivized towards choosing plastic water because of a lower price. Wolff had even

¹ https://boxedwaterisbetter.com/
² https://boxedwaterisbetter.com/pages/why-boxed-is-better
suggested imposing a sustainability tax on plastic water bottles so that PSBs were actually more expensive than boxed waters. However, Dining Services ultimately decided that educating the customer and providing equivalently-priced alternatives was already a helpful step towards greater sustainability within Catering. When the Coca-Cola canned Dasani water is released, Wolff will switch to exclusively providing disposable water in a can format, which will completely eliminate SPB from Catering’s menu.

In addition to redirecting demand within the single-use market, Wolff also attempts to guide customers towards bulk water—served in a large dispenser with ice and lemons—instead of any form of disposable water. Bulk water is nearly always the most economical option for an organized event, as it comes free with any other beverage order (such as coffee), or retails for $15 per container if it’s the only beverage ordered. Also beginning in January 2020, Catering servers will default to providing bulk water if the event organizer does not specify between disposable or bulk water.

However, a potential limitation of bulk water is its higher set-up and take-down efforts as compared to bottled water. Wolff comments, “99% of our deliveries are outside of this building. So that means [we’re] bringing water, bringing the containers, setting them up, and having to retrieve them after events. Whereas with bottled water, you drop them off and you don’t necessarily come back…With those logistics, we might not be able to take as much business as we currently are.” Wolff still plans to continue to advocate for bulk water whenever possible, but also remains cognizant of the capacity limits of Catering Services.

Beyond eliminating single-use plastic bottles, Wolff seeks to replace plastic in other aspects of Catering’s functions and advocate for sustainability more broadly. In January 2020, Wolff is going to expand Catering’s current compostable fleet of cups, plates, serving utensils to include compostable lids. Additionally, he’s planning to source the hot beverage cups from sustainable bamboo instead of cardboard, so that they don’t even require the destruction of trees in their manufacture. Further, Wolff seeks to empower Catering customers to make “greener” food choices by applying the Office for Sustainability leaf icon to more sustainable options on the menu.
Wolff acknowledges that as the Director of Catering within the university, he possibly has more freedom than retail managers to promote sustainability. “Sometimes in a retail operation,” he says, “there’s a hesitancy to use a more expensive product because they feel less able to pass that [cost] along to their customer.” Wolff feels that in contrast, due to the nature of catering being a lavish excess frequently funded by an organization rather than an individual, he has greater ability to pass along the cost of a more sustainable option.