



# **Trash Free Texas Restaurant Program Toolkit for Restaurants**

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## Purpose of Toolkit and How to Use It

This toolkit was created for restaurants who are seeking information on strategies to reduce the use of single-use plastics. This toolkit also includes resources for promoting these strategies to patrons, an equally important component of implementation. For the purposes of this toolkit, single-use plastics refers mainly to plastic straws and plastic utensils. However, some restaurants may want to reduce even more types of single-use plastics over time and after the initial practices become more established.

Users of this toolkit are welcome to use the included resources for promoting the strategies. They can be used, as is, or as a template for your own ideas. The Trash Free Texas team hopes that this toolkit will help you take the first step toward reducing the use of single-use practices at your restaurant. Implementing these strategies will require changes to staff training and regular routines, and with those changes, there will likely be some stumbling blocks along the path. But, if you stick to it and learn lessons along the way, these strategies are expected to result in lower costs for restaurants, and overall, good publicity as well.

## Naming of the Trash Free Texas Restaurant Program

The Trash Free Texas Restaurant Program is a term used to help the Trash Free Texas team identify the toolkit for reporting and discussion purposes. Restaurants who wish to implement these strategies or ideas, and communities as well, can choose to use this name or come up with their own name.

## Single-Use Plastic Reduction Strategies and Resources for Restaurants

### Customer Opt-In and Opt-Out Strategies

One of the simplest strategies for reducing single-use plastics and their cost to restaurants is to change the default practice of automatically providing those items to customers. If customers are asked whether they need a single-use plastic straw or plasticware set (opt-out), or if those items are provided only when customers request them (opt-in), customers may realize they do not need them. This results in less waste

from single-use (or often no-use) plastics, and restaurants will need to place fewer orders for those items, and will need less space to store the items. However, it also allows customers to still have the option of using items like straws if they need them. Overall though, fewer orders can equal cost savings.

#### *Opt-In Strategies*

- Make plasticware for takeout orders a choice on your website by either adding a checkbox that customers need to check if they want the item or adding plasticware as a separate menu item to select.
- Do not automatically put single-use plastic straws in drinks or on a table when bringing drinks. Instead have them available only if customers ask for them. In a counter-serving set up, straws could be behind the counter/bar and only provided upon request.

#### *Opt-Out Strategies*

- Train staff taking takeout orders in-restaurant or over the phone to ask if plasticware is needed and to note that on the order, so it does not get placed in the bag if customers do not need it.
- For takeout orders on a website, another option is to have a box on the website that says “I do not need plasticware” that customers can check when they order. However, this still makes plasticware the default choice unlike the Opt-In strategy above.
- Train staff to ask if customers want a straw before automatically providing one. Alternatively, if straws are provided at a general serving station by a soda fountain, signage could be displayed asking customers to reconsider if they need a straw and informing them about the reason to reconsider.

#### *What you might need to implement this strategy*

- Possible changes to your website
- Staff training

#### *Promotion of Opt-In and Opt-Out Strategies*

- For restaurants concerned about customer reactions to an Opt-In or Opt-Out strategy, or those wanting to promote these efforts for a smoother transition and greater impact, please see the section of this toolkit titled, “Positive Promotion of Plastic Reduction Efforts.”

#### *Case Study: Phat Eatery Opt-In and Opt-Out Plastic Reduction Changes*

Restaurant: Phat Eatery in Katy, Texas

Location: Katy, Texas 77449

Phat Eatery took steps to reduce its use of plastic utensils during the pandemic by initiating both an Opt-In and Opt-Out strategy for plastic utensils. Phat Eatery started asking customers if they wanted plastic utensils with their order, and then later made changes to their website.

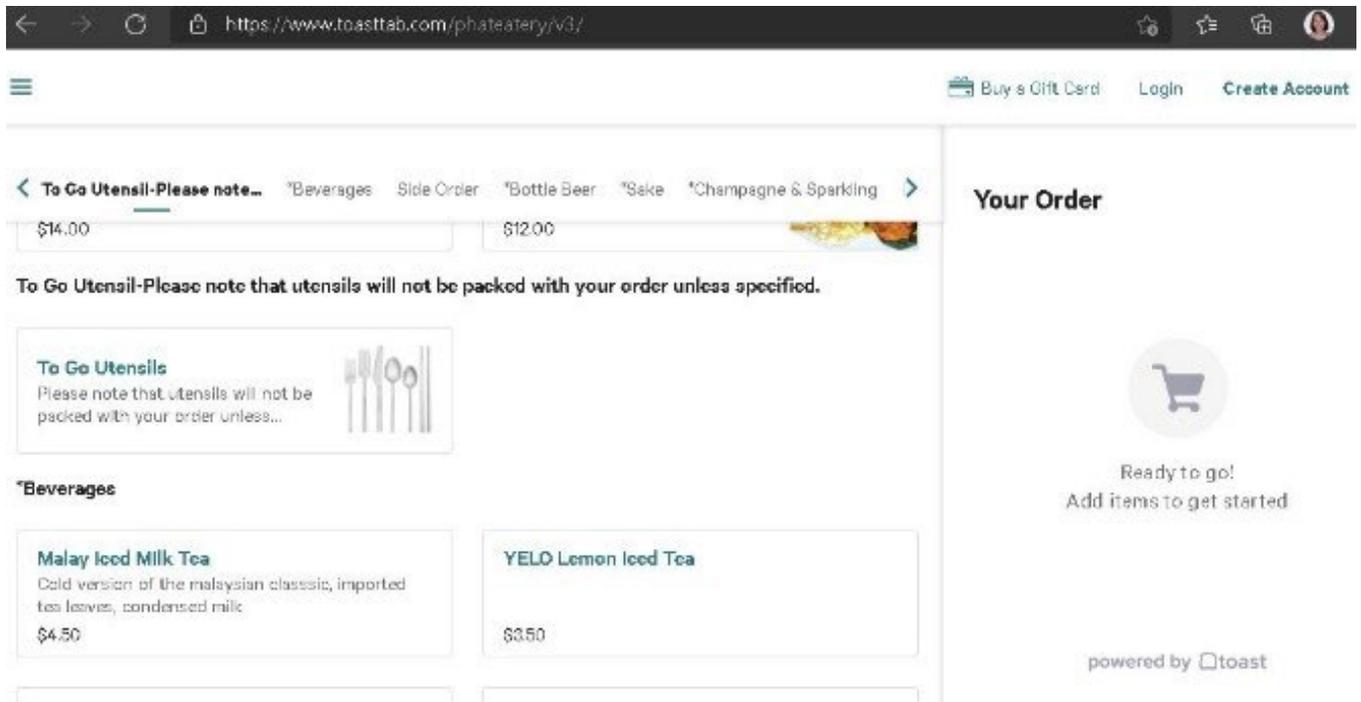


Figure 1. Screenshots from the Phat Eatery online order platform.

Alex Au-Yeung with Phat Eatery said, “At the beginning of the [COVID-19] pandemic, we put plastic utensils in every order just like before. Then we realized the amount of plasticware we were going through. It was like 4 to 5 cases a week. I thought we should be eating at home anyway; we started to ask if customers want utensils on every phone order. The usage went down to no more than half a case a week.”

Phat Eatery also incorporated an “Opt-In” option for plastic cutlery on their online ordering system. In their case, the plasticware is actually an item on the menu customers have to check if they want to receive it with their order and includes a disclaimer to let customers know. Some online platforms use a checkbox that must be selected and serves the same purpose.

Alex estimates that their cost-savings from this “Opt-In” policy is at least \$500 per week. While it is worth noting that the cost savings might be greater due to the greater popularity of online and to-go orders during the pandemic, this policy will still provide cost-saving if to-go and online orders subside to pre-pandemic levels.

[Suggestion to add to Trash Free Texas website: A survey link for restaurants asking if they have implemented any strategies and if they saw cost savings.]

#### Case Study Option – The Houston Zoo

- Removed single-use plastics (bottles, straws) from restaurants on site.
  - Used signage to educate customers (saving sea turtles) and provided alternatives
  - Educated staff to be fully aware of why this measure was implemented
- Helped pilot a program with local bars and restaurants
  - Bars and restaurants reached out to them
  - Some just removed the straws from the bar, and customers had to ask for them
  - Customer response has been overall good with consistent messaging and staff education

- Used community-based social marketing
  - Long-term behavior change
  - Laws are not always the solution
  - People have to want to change
  - Find compelling reason(s) to change
  - Find the real barriers to change
  - Create a simple path to change
  - Must be cost effective
- Resources from this program can be made available as part of the toolkit (To be included)
  - No need to re-invent the wheel of a successful program

## Strategies for Restaurants Looking for Sustainable Plastic Alternatives

### *Switching to single-use alternative items (cups, straws, to-go containers)*

To reduce the use of single-use plastics, some restaurants simply choose to swap out the plastic options for alternate single-use items made from materials that are considered more “sustainable”. This a valid strategy to reduce single-use plastic, but it is worth noting that some of these materials have not been as well received by customers and might require more investigation or customer education. Also, some alternative options may not be as “sustainable” as they are marketed. Some of these alternative options are discussed below.

- Paper straws and cups
  - Note that paper straws can be unsatisfactory to customers, and some studies have shown that paper straws lose their effectiveness in as little as thirty minutes.
- Paper bags for to-go orders
- Paper or Compostable To-go containers – but put warning about not actually compostable
  - Neither of these types of containers can be recycled. Compostable containers are not compostable under all conditions and programs, they can only be composted in certain programs, so you may need to check with your municipality or waste hauler for programs available in your area.
- Sturdy/rigid to-go containers that can be washed/re-used by customers for other purposes/uses

### *Switching to/encouraging reusable items (cups, straws, to-go containers)*

Another strategy for reducing single-use plastics is to make sustainable alternatives appealing to customers. If customers have an option to save money by bringing in re-usable items (approved and sold by the restaurants), they may be more likely to use them and less likely to need single-use cups and straws. While this strategy may cost the restaurant more initially along with the cost of the discount applied for using them, some of these costs can be passed on to the customers (cost of initially purchasing the reusable items) or incurred at a minimum (offering discounts on menu items that are highly marked up, such as drinks.) Plus, customers receiving an incentive to use your products at your restaurant (either financial or philosophical), will be more motivated to return in the future. This results in less waste from single-use plastics, and restaurants will need to place fewer orders for those items. Fewer orders can equal cost savings.

- Encourage customers to bring their own reusable cups, straws, and to-go containers. These items should be used only with expressed permission from the restaurant and the restaurant reserves the right to approve and disapprove of all reusable materials.
- Branded reusable items – Branded reusable items can be useful tools to reduce single-use waste in some restaurants with frequent repeat customers where incentives are provided to use the items. However, it is important to consider the incentives and likelihood of customer reuse, otherwise this strategy could lead to further trash creation.
- Provide incentives or discounts to customers
  - Discount for using sustainable items (either own or purchased branded from restaurant)
    - Offer a drink discount for customers who bring back and use the reusable cups, a free dessert on their next visit when using the re-usable to-go container, or some other non-monetary or low-cost incentive.
  - Entering their name in a drawing to be featured on your website or in your restaurant as Plastic Reduction Hero of the Month or Customer of the Month
  - Punch card when bringing in reusable items for a future discount/prize
  - Charge more than the cost of a large drink to purchase the cup, motivating customers to return to the restaurant for their discount.

#### *Switching to reusable silverware, plates, and cups*

The surest way to replace single-use plastics in a restaurant and reduce waste is to use reusable items that get washed after customer use. These are the standard cups, silverware, and plates or baskets found in many dine-in restaurants. While initial costs of purchasing might be higher, and there are added costs for dishwashing, this strategy does not require the recurring cost of purchasing the single-use items. Costs for this strategy can be potentially offset by having customers bus their own tables and return the reusable items to bins near trash cans that have signage requesting this action.

#### *What you might need to implement these strategies*

- Staff training
- Purchase of single-use plastics alternatives
- Invest in reusable alternatives to sell
- Develop an incentive program
  - Consider cost-benefit analysis of savings vs. initial investment
  - Invest in additional materials like punch cards, etc.
  - Create advertising/promotion for the incentive

#### *Promotion of single-use plastic alternative strategies*

- For restaurants looking for more information about the single-use plastic alternative strategy, or those wanting to promote these efforts for a smoother transition and greater impact, please see the next section, “Positive Promotion of Plastic Reduction Efforts.”

## Positive Promotion of Plastic Reduction Efforts

### Signage

Signage can come in various formats depending on the setup and needs of your restaurant, including posters, window decals, table tents, napkin holder inserts, inserts or additions for menus, stickers, and more. Whatever format is used, the signage should be placed in a location where the customer will see it when considering their options, such as at an ordering window, near a beverage station, or on the tables. In general, signage should also be positive rather than negative, and should either make customers feel like participants or like they are getting a win, rather than trying to guilt customers. For example, signage could note the positive reasons a restaurant has reduced plastic and invite the customer to help, such as “By reducing our use of single-use plastics we are helping keep sea turtles safe from harmful debris – you can help by skipping the straw today.” In general, signage should avoid language that emphasizes that many people use and discard plastic items that become litter, as noting that “many people” are doing something can often make it seem normal and reduce the likelihood of change even if it is a negative behavior.

- Signage that encourages customers to think about whether they need the single-use plastic item;
- Signage that highlights the positive benefits of the reduced plastic waste, either focused on the environment, the community, or wildlife;
- Signage that ties the restaurant’s actions to a positive community/nature impact;
- Signage that provides information or instructions on specific restaurant strategies or incentive programs and/or highlights how participation benefits the customer.

### Interactive Promotion

Interactive promotion materials may not necessarily help with customer acceptance or learning of new strategies, but they can be a way to celebrate the success of the program and raise customer awareness and participation.

- Pledge - you can have a pledge that customers can sign to say they are helping reduce single-use plastic waste. This pledge could be on a wall of the restaurant for all customers to see and sign, on a website, or even on items like paper kids’ menus.
- Running count of reduced plastic – you can keep a count of how many single-use plastic items your customers have helped to reduce and highlight it somewhere in the restaurant or on the restaurant website. It could be updated at whatever interval works best.
- Piloting plastic reduction efforts during targeted times of the year, such as [Earth Day](#) or [Plastic Free July](#).

### Additional Resources

- Cost Saving calculators
  - <https://upstreamolutions.org/reuse-savings-calculator>
  - <https://www.productstewardship.us/page/FoodwareCalculator>
- Beyond Plastics, a project based out of Bennington College in Bennington, Vermont released a toolkit for restaurants called [“Hold the Plastic, Please, A Restaurant’s Guide to Reducing Plastic”](#)

on July 25, 2022. Provides resources and case studies for restaurants. Also provides information for patrons who want to engage restaurants in this effort.

- [Resources for Restaurants — Plastic Free Restaurants](#)

The resources available on this website include: an opportunity for a cash subsidy to convert from single-use items to reusables, a Reusable Food Services Product database, a Reusable Food Serviceware Guide created by ReThink Disposable, a Single-Use Foodware Database created by the Center for Environmental Health, and a searchable database of composting facilities near you. Also included is the sign-up for a nationwide list if you are already a plastic-free restaurant.

If you are a restaurant owner or manager and your restaurant would like to implement one or more of the plastic reduction strategies discussed, please reach out to the Trash Free Texas team at [EandD@nctcog.org](mailto:EandD@nctcog.org) or [WaterResources@h-gac.com](mailto:WaterResources@h-gac.com), for help obtaining printed posters, flyers, etc you're your use. Or, please feel free to download and fill in the needed text on any of the example templates found in the Appendices or use them as a starting point to create your own. You are free to print any of the templates in the Appendix for your use in the program.

## Appendices

The templates for the promotional materials in the following appendices were designed in various sizes and with various Texas wildlife. The Trash Free Texas project team chose to create different sizes based on the different display areas available at certain restaurants for flyers, stickers, etc. Various Texas wildlife (sea turtle, armadillo, and heron) were selected for the templates based on the great diversity of the state in terms of having both coastal and inland communities. A sea turtle might be more relatable to restaurant patrons in the Houston-Galveston region, whereas an armadillo or heron would be more relatable to a restaurant patron in the Dallas-Fort Worth region.

The templates in the following appendices are all available in three sizes: a standard rectangular flyer/poster at 8.5 inches x 11 inches, a circular sticker/decal at approximately 4 inches, and as napkin inserts at 6.5 inches x 4.25 inches. The templates shown in the appendices are the napkin insert size. Not all the sizes for the templates are included in the Appendix to reduce repetition because the images and text remain the same for all the templates available, just the size and shape of the templates are different. (NOTE: All the sizes and samples will be posted to the Trash Free Texas website when this toolkit is posted.) Other sizes and text can be made available, pending feedback from the pilots. Note that many of the templates come in pairs. The difference between them is that one has more space for the restaurant name and logo. These templates with the additional space were created based on feedback from the Single-Use Plastic Reduction Workgroup, which met on November 7, 2022.

Appendix A – Templates for Signage Asking Patrons to  
Reconsider Straws, Lids, and Plastic Utensils

# Help Us Save Sea Turtles



[Restaurant Name or Logo]

[Restaurant Name] is reducing our single-use plastic waste to help save wildlife like sea turtles.

You can help by skipping the straw, utensils or drink lids when you don't need them.

If you need an item - don't worry, we have them available on request. Just make sure you properly dispose of the items.

# Help Us Save Sea Turtles



[Restaurant Name] is reducing our single-use plastic waste to help save wildlife like sea turtles.

You can help by skipping the straw, utensils or drink lids when you don't need them.

If you need an item - don't worry, we have them available on request. Just make sure you properly dispose of the items.



# Help Us Save Our Wildlife



[Restaurant Name or Logo]

[Restaurant Name] is reducing our single-use plastic waste to help protect our wildlife.

You can help by skipping the straw, like utensils or drink lids when you don't need them.

If you need an item - don't worry, we have them available on request. Just make sure you properly dispose of the items.



# Help Us Save Our Wildlife



[Restaurant Name or Logo]

[Restaurant Name] is reducing our single-use plastic waste to help protect our wildlife.

You can help by skipping the straw, like utensils or drink lids when you don't need them.

If you need an item - don't worry, we have them available on request. Just make sure you properly dispose of the items.

# Help Us Keep Our Community Clean



[Restaurant Name or Logo]

is reducing our single-use plastic waste to keep litter out of our community.

You can help by skipping the straw, utensils or drink lids when you don't need them.

If you need an item - don't worry, we have them available on request. Just make sure you properly dispose of the items.

TRASH  
FREE  
TEXAS

# A TRASH FREE TEXAS STARTS HERE



[Restaurant  
Name or  
Logo]

is reducing our single-use plastic waste to keep litter out of our community. You can help by skipping the straw, utensils or drink lids when you don't need them. If you need an item - don't worry, we have them available on request. Just make sure you properly dispose of the items.

# TAKE A PAUSE ON PLASTIC

[Restaurant Name or Logo]

is reducing our single-use plastic waste to keep litter out of our community.

You can help by skipping the straw, utensils or drink lids when you don't really need them.

If you need an item - don't worry, we have them available on request. Just make sure you properly dispose of the items.



## Appendix B – Example Signage for Reusable Cups



# SAVE \$\$\$

## WHEN YOU BRING YOUR CUP



**BUY A CUP**  
Purchase a large drink in a reusable, plastic cup



**REFILL YOUR CUP**  
Bring your cup back to refill on your next visit



**SAVE \$\$\$**  
Get a large drink for just \$1 with your cup



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