

Waste Not The Profit

By Jeff Reinke, Editorial Director, Manufacturing Group

While it's not the first time a trip to Starbucks has helped propel my work, it usually has more to do with the caffeine kick than any topical inspiration. However, a visit last week offered some insight on both the innovation and challenges that lie ahead for the processing industry.

In particular, it wasn't what I bought, but what was being given away at this particular location that got me thinking. On the counter as I was picking up my order sat a couple bags of used coffee grounds that were being offered free of charge for anyone who might want to use them as fertilizer in their gardens or flower beds. Although minimal, I'm sure this byproduct of Starbucks' production process does encompass some disposal costs. So from their perspective, if they can lower their expenses and help someone else's production efforts in the process, it's a win-win.

For many in the processing arena, this might sound familiar.

It got me thinking about materials like sawdust, food scraps and other waste products that research and ingenuity have identified as either key components for, or the actual feedstock in, developing new energy sources. While they were initially offered up at little or no charge by companies happy to get rid of these materials, they soon became a viable commodity with a new customer base. Competition for these waste products offered an opportunity for paper mills and food processors, for example, to establish a new, albeit small, profit center from what was just garbage not so long ago.

While the company creating these waste byproducts reaps a benefit, this dynamic also increases the operating costs of those trying to advance new energy sources. For example, in spending time with the folks at Schmack Bioenergy outside of Cleveland last fall, I learned that they recently began to get charged for the sawdust they had been getting for free. This is a key ingredient of their formula to process biowaste in creating energy.

While I'd never fault anyone in their efforts to improve the bottom line, I just wonder if this type of market change could produce long-term hardships for a country that needs to overhaul its energy production and consumption strategies. I think this dynamic has the potential to test not only the viability of many approaches to new energy sources, but also limit the amount of work being done to push past what is currently in place, and develop even more powerful and efficient energy production methods.

Food scraps that were hauled to landfills not long ago are now being sold for use in

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oil creation. Cow manure seen as nothing more than field fertilizer is now powering digesters that feed local electrical grids. These are great developments, but as these initiatives progress, the challenge lies in keeping the cost of these “wasteful” byproducts in line with the solution — not part of the problem.

Have any thoughts? E-mail me at jeff.reinke@advantagemedia.com [1].

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