



THE LAST PLASTIC STRAW



Backlot Coffee serves **STAINLESS STEEL STRAWS** to dine-in customers and will soon offer them for sale.

PAPER STRAWS are offered to to-go customers who request one—ideally, in one of Backlot's brand-new branded, reusable mugs. Switching from plastic can pay off.



Backlot Coffee switched from plastic to paper and stainless steel straws, and created a slew of new sustainable packaging merchandising opportunities.

By Robin Roenker

Back in April—months ahead of Seattle's city-wide ban, which went into effect this July—Backlot Coffee abolished unrecyclable plastic straws in their Chicago and Evanston, Illinois, cafés.

"The idea was really brought to us by customers who wanted to see us do better, and we were like, 'You're right, we should!'" said Isaac Bloom, who co-founded Backlot in 2016 with business partner John Kim.

Starting on Earth Day (April 20) 2018, Backlot replaced standard plastic straws with paper and PLA (plastic biodegradable) straws for takeaway. They also started serving stainless steel straws for dine-in customers, and additionally began composting all their coffee grounds and compostable serving products with Evanston, Illinois-based **Collective Resource**, a commercial composting service. All told, Bloom estimates they're redirecting about 2,000 pounds of waste every month from going into landfills.

Meanwhile, Bloom ramped up Backlot's marketing of **branded mugs**, **glassware**, and **Hydro Flasks**, selling them at cost during the launch of the Earth-friendly campaign. Furthermore, the cafés started offering an ongoing, per-cup discount to customers who bring in their own reusable container, with bigger savings for those who use the shop's branded ware.

"If you bring in one of our large Hydro Flasks, we charge you for a small size," Bloom said. "We are seeing a ton of them now every day. It basically pays for itself in a matter of months, and from that point forward it's like a reward program for our regular customers, without having a punch card."

Bloom decided not to go completely straw-free. Some customers still choose to use them, while others have a genuine need for one. So he researched alternatives, manufacturers, and suppliers online. He ordered samples and tried them out with hot and cold drinks, asking his staff and customers for their feedback.

Bloom found that paper straws tend to fall apart in lattes and other hot drinks, so he opted instead for PLA straws, which are made from a compostable, corn-based polymer. Backlot has also switched to recyclable or compostable to-go cups and lids, and compostable paper bags and utensils.

Most popular of all, though, are the stainless steel straws Backlot now uses for dine-in service. "Those have been the biggest hit—so much so that people have asked if they can buy them from us," Bloom said. "So now we're looking at making custom-branded stainless straws to sell as well. That's been a surprise we didn't see coming."

Cleaning the reusable steel straws has not been overly burdensome. "They come with a little brush which goes into the straws, so we scrub them out on both ends with soap and water, rinse them, and soak them in sanitizer. It's an extra step, but it's not that difficult," Bloom said.

"For businesses, it's an easy decision to make—it's a small change that can have a big impact," Bloom said. ©

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