



Photo: Boat Poveenorn Duangpen

FOOD WASTE ENGINEERS

STORY **NIANNE-LYNN HENDRICKS**

FACTBOX

Benjamin Lephilbert is the founder of LightBlue Environmental Consulting, a Bangkok based firm aiming at maximising the profitability of hotels and government agencies while minimising social and environmental footprints. A pioneer for food waste prevention, Lephilbert contributed to the design of The Pledge On Food Waste. In Thailand, he works with Club Med, Accor, Hilton and Sampran hotel groups, to name a few. *Guru* had a chat with him at last week's {Re} Food Forum.

How did you get into the business of sustainability?

I was contracted by a French company to come to Thailand, but a few days before departure that deal was cancelled. I came anyways and soon met the HR director of Accor Hotels. I told him I did not want to work with my father, whose business was dealing chemicals, so he asked me to apply for a new job opening. This was when sustainability was new to the industry and I got the job. I was in charge of implanting certification programmes in 45 Novotel properties in Asia.

Why the need to set up LightBlue Environmental Consulting?

Again, it wasn't really a plan, it just happened. My tenure at Accor ended and I went to Australia and England and came back here and soon was hired as a consultant for the UN to deal with sustainability in the hotel industry. I saw the need for a company and decided to create one.

Why the name LightBlue and why are you based in Asia?

Because there was too much green bullsh*t happening. It is a word that is heavily used and used in a confusing way, so I decided to go for something that is blue like water; like life and light as in light impact and it also means the sun and life for me. It was life that decided I be based in Bangkok. I have always been attracted to Asia, having spent some time in China. I met my wife here, on the BTS, and decided to settle down here.

Is it possible for hotels to be sustainable and how far can they go?

Define sustainable, right? There is a lot of buzz and misunderstanding about sustainability. There are so many aspects. It is such a complex issue that I don't think at this stage any hotel can even dream of being 100% sustainable. There are pioneers and role models, but the further you dig, the more complicated. There are so many issues from energy to waste, to security to local communities to food waste. For each of them it is a cross-departmental approach that needs to be adopted. It's a mix between technology, hardware and software, and human interaction. I have yet to come across a hotel that is zero waste. Out of all the different components that define sustainability, it's difficult to answer the question. Many hotels offset their carbon emissions – most are located on islands, like in the Maldives. But they are offsetting them, not preventing them. If we are able to advice hotels to get to 80% sustainability, then it's fantastic.

Why is tackling of food waste the next big thing in the hotel industry? It is not new.

It is because people, especially the press, are talking about it. It is not new for hotels. This

is why I got into this niche, the complete lack of understanding about where food waste is happening, when is it happening, how much does it represent, how much does it impact the bottom line, how many kilos do you have at the end of the day, what's the daily consumption of food waste at each of your outlets, what is your ratio per cover, etc. There was no metrics or benchmark that was being used. Just to be clear, food waste happening around the buffets are only a small portion of the entire issue. In large hotels, with several outlets, we see that close to 50% of food waste is at the pre-consumption level. There is no capturing of this food waste in quantifications, bins work like black holes and they are everywhere. Out of sight is out of mind. No questions asked.

How did you develop LightBlue's system for tackling food waste?

Initially I was running audits on sustainability and saw the gap of benchmarking. I found some tools on managing food waste and based those tools on building a methodology. Since then it's about refining and fine-tuning and adjusting to the different situations we

work in – be it an island resort, city hotel or even in schools. I pick interesting things from different approaches like human resource management or strategy, and include it to design the most effective solution to address the issues. It is quite complex.

What is The Pledge On Food Waste?

It is the outcome of a collaboration with some scholars, academics and other professionals in this field. The Pledge On Food Waste is a tangible answer to a tricky issue, that is food waste. But it is more designed to help adapters save, rather than help them boast about their commitment. That's really important. It is coming from the practice that was put into a standard. This standard is articulated around nine key guidelines that range from having a policy to a monitoring system in place to using different financial KPIs that go beyond what the industry currently uses, to training employees at all levels. Most importantly, exploring every possibility to rescue food before it ends up in landfills, which is the worst option. What really makes a difference, is that it is designed for continuous improvement. If you reach the maximum standard, you get 70 points. But if you want to go the extra mile you get additional points, which is helpful to benchmark restaurants against each other.

Why is certification important?

A sad thing happened in 2010. Many big hotel groups withdrew from independent certifications and decided to do it themselves. What ended up happening was the money was being used for PR. It was all about self-claiming and self-reporting so to avoid the hassle of external audits, who check the claims. It's an open opportunity to say what you please. It was a disaster, especially when you see how the hotels advertised heavily on how green they are. This is why a standard is important.

How serious are LightBlue's clients in implementing your system?

It depends. One issue with food waste is that communication, especially when it comes from the CSR department, is wrong. The other issue is that our methodology is to get a very thorough understanding of operations and many don't like that. We provide facts and tangible information in an area that is very grey. And of course, when you are collecting information some are unpleasant for those running the hotel because they feel exposed. ■

Visit lightblueconsulting.com and thepledgeonfoodwaste.org.

Food for thought ...

1/3 of all the food we buy we throw away.

