

Equipment Rebates Help Trim Costs

By Susan Liane Kennedy

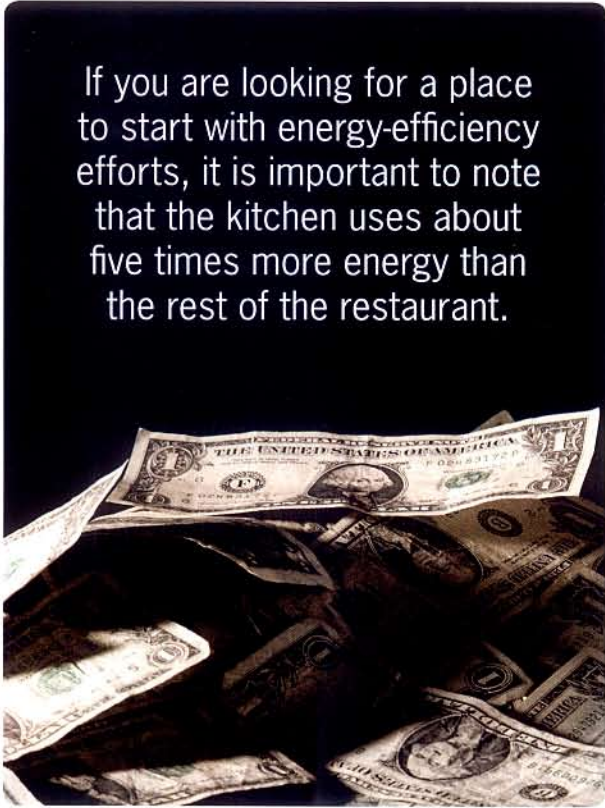
More and more restaurant owners are feeling squeezed by high energy and operating costs, along with their customers' tighter budgets. As highly competitive businesses in challenging times, what can restaurants do to keep their energy bills down while continuing to attract customers?

Using massive amounts of gas and propane for cooking, and stunning amounts of electricity for refrigeration and special lighting, restaurants are among the most energy intensive businesses in the world. In the United States alone, restaurants use up to \$10 billion worth of energy annually. Unfortunately, up to 80 percent of that is wasted through excess heat and inefficient kitchen equipment, according to the Food Service Technology Center in California. The good news is that in the state of Washington there are numerous energy-efficiency options to help restaurants save energy and money. To help reduce energy use and utility bills, many restaurant equipment manufacturers are producing new appliances that are much more energy efficient, using up to 50 percent less than older models. Additionally, many utility companies are offering rebates for purchasing and installing energy efficient commercial kitchen equipment.

"The rebates that utility companies are offering have gotten better and better," said Dirk Happee of Dick's Restaurant Supply. "We focus on helping customers make choices that will improve their operations and their bottom line, so recommending energy efficient equipment is important — we would be negligent if we didn't do it."

With stores in Seattle, Bellevue and Mt. Vernon, Dick's Restaurant Supply offers a variety of restaurant, bakery and deli equipment for most facets of the food service industry. Dick's offers an "off-invoice" program that works in conjunction with the rebates offered by utility companies to support the sales of energy-efficient equipment.

"We submit the rebate forms for pre-qualified customers when they purchase the equipment, and we are able to take the rebate amount off of the invoice," said Happee.



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If you are looking for a place to start with energy-efficiency efforts, it is important to note that the kitchen uses about five times more energy than the rest of the restaurant. One popular item that qualifies for a rebate with many utility companies is a convection oven. Since a convection oven cooks faster than a conventional oven, it uses less energy. With the rebates and the savings in energy costs, a convection oven is a smart choice for most restaurants.

A bonus of making energy efficiency a priority in equipment purchasing is that it saves money over the long run. Energy efficiency is truly the gift that keeps on giving. Restaurants that invest strategically in energy efficiency can cut utility costs 10 to 30 percent without sacrificing service, quality, style or comfort.

John Baggee of 12 Baskets Catering in Kirkland, Wash. said, "In this business every little bit counts. I saved \$2,500 with energy rebates and got some great equipment deals... so I saved money going in, and I'll continue to save money every month."

Attracting customers in this difficult economy is an issue for restaurant owners, second only to keeping costs down. They are finding that environmentally-conscious customers in Washington are often motivated by a restaurant that is perceived as "green" or "sustainable" in its business practices.

For that reason alone, utility companies are finding it easier and easier to sell restaurants on energy efficiency. "Most restaurant owners are looking for ways to reduce their operating costs while becoming more environmentally responsible, which in turn makes their establishment more appealing to patrons," said Doug Dickson, Puget Sound Energy's commercial rebate manager. "When saving money walks hand in hand with a "green" business image, my job is easy."

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