

by Paul van der Werf

"The industry needs to come to a place where poor performance and bad actors are ostracized."



Perfecting the Brand

Compost versus "composting"

I find that during these times when everything seems to be creaking and slowing down that I need to speed up and work harder just to try and keep up. It is of course a function of operating a consultancy. When you're busy fulfilling contracts you're still busy chasing new ones. When the marketplace changes, you're trying to define a new one. And as with all things it comes down to fundamentals: the basics of running a business and keeping it afloat.

This "first principles" approach is useful in all sorts of applications. As I prepared for the recent Composting Council of Canada "Composting Matters" workshop, in London, Ontario at which I moderated a panel on odour control, it struck me that as an industry we have perfected many of the fundamentals of processing organic waste, whether to produce compost or (more recently) energy.

However, some challenges still remain.

It's useful to think of composting and compost as a collective brand. Brands are obviously much more than the trademarks or logos with which they're associated. Brands are a collection of feelings, opinions and associations that consumers or potential consumers have towards the products the brand represents. Large and small companies work very hard to develop and then maintain their brands. For instance during the recent Listeria outbreak, Maple Leaf Foods worked very hard to explain the situation to the public, what they were going to do solve it, and (at the end) what they did to solve the situation. On the other hand, and at about the same time Bernard Madoff, was doing about the opposite to his family's — as it turned out, falsely constructed — brand.

Composting and compost are a brand certainly on a macro level and on many micro levels. As an industry I think it is useful to think of compost in this way so that we better understand the good and sometimes the bad associations our actions can have on what is our collective brand.

"Compost" as a brand has great associations. I think if you asked the average man (but certainly woman) on the street they would view compost as a product as something that is positive, good for the earth and so on. This name recognition and consumer's positive feelings are a result of the hard work of an industry to make a high quality product. Efforts such as the Composting Council's Compost Quality Alliance are trying to extend that further and ultimately further build up the consumer's trust.

"Composting" (note the suffix) as a brand, on the other hand, has a spotty track record at best. While many operators out there understand what they're doing and ably control their processes others have haphazardly put infrastructure in place not really caring about outcomes and creating significant odour nuisances. Even the best run facilities have had process upsets and incidents of off-site odour.

Solving problems is generally a quantitative exercise: finding the right pieces and putting them in place.

The management of odour from composting facilities has proved to be elusive. Outdoor operations focus on dispersion to dissipate odours. This is really no odour control at all, relying on distance and (hopefully gracious) meteorological conditions. However, it can and does work (certainly for leaf and yard waste) although the industry is hitting walls with getting outdoor systems to work for source-separated organics and (surprisingly) to a lesser extent, biosolids. Even some indoor composting facilities with superior odour abatement infrastructure have had challenges.

People surrounding proposed composting facilities are quite rightly skeptical about odour as an issue. While I cannot emphasize enough that there are many well run composting facilities there are enough poorly operated ones to warrant neighbourhood skepticism that is beyond simple NIMBYism.

To grow our industry to the next level we need to set a goal that in the next three to five years we'll work to perfect our composting sys-



tems and eliminate odour as an issue. We need to improve the composting brand so that only good things are associated with it.

The state of this challenge is three-fold:

1. The state of odour assessment and monitoring is reasonable but requires significant improvement.

Odour dispersion modeling is imperfect and requires refinement to more accurately discern where odour could be an issue. An improvement in this area will facilitate better up front assessment and ultimately better siting of composting facilities.

2. Odour abatement technology requires further refinement and more universal implementation.

A number of companies manufacture odour abatement infrastructure such as biofilters. Based on performance, it's clear that this part of the industry has progressed. However, there's still considerable room for improvement in terms of efficacy but (more importantly) in terms of technology implementation. Compost facilities sometimes balk at the cost of biofiltration systems and inexplicably use a DIY approach. Odour control is too important to not bring in professionals to at least design if not install a proper biofilter or odour abatement infrastructure.


3. Facilities are not always operated properly.

There are some unfortunate examples of poor quality compost facilities and/or operators who don't operate their facilities properly or don't share most of the industry's values when it comes to impacting the area surrounding the compost facility.


You can have a well located site with great odour abatement infrastructure but if you do not operate the facility well it can be all for naught. This includes fugitive emissions — that is, odours not captured by odour abatement infrastructure. This can be a real thorn in the side of composting facilities.

The industry needs to come to a place where poor performance and bad actors are ostracized. It needs to be made very clear that this type of performance is unacceptable.

Ultimately we want compost and composting brands that people only associate with good things. If odour continues to be an issue some other form of waste processing will eventually emerge and prove to be a better option. If odour is no longer an issue then composting and other forms of organic waste processing


will be able to realize what seems like limitless potential. This challenge is eminently solvable — and should be. 


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