



“Elevating the composting brand to the same stature as the compost brand requires concerted industry efforts to resolve technological and operating issues.”



COMPOSTING PIONEERS

The First Twenty and the Next Five

This is the final instalment in the Composting Pioneers series.

I had imagined that this would be a triumphant conclusion to the series which was meant to be a celebration of the industry’s accomplishment. However, today as I started to write this column I looked at the headline in my local newspaper that proclaimed “Composter raises a stink.”

While as an industry we celebrate 20 years of sustained composting activity I wish we were beyond negative headlines like this.

While a newspaper headline is just a newspaper headline in this case it’s continuing to create a narrative that’s deleterious to our industry. Newspaper headlines such as this are a kernel of perception that — if allowed to repeat — eventually becomes public consensus or (worse yet) confirms the consensus.

This is seriously eroding the hard work of the industry, most of whose members operate their facilities well and make high quality compost.

As an industry we have successfully created the message that compost is good. Compost is a solid brand.

We have not had the same brand success with composting and, in particular, the composting of more challenging feedstocks, such as source-separated organics. If you asked the average resident about having a composting facility near their neighbourhood I think you know what the answer would be: They don’t want our factories.

We are twenty now and it’s time for the industry to shed its growing pains and fully mature. To ensure the longevity of our industry I believe we have less than five years to improve composting brand.

This means identifying and solving technological and operational problems to the point where facilities consistently perform and where odour is no longer an off-site issue. If not the consideration and implementation of other biological treatment technologies will continue. While some of this shift in the marketplace is natural, continued odour issues will accelerate this process.

While the foregoing can be perceived as negative or overly pessimistic, I think it’s the truth.

The other truths are that there is far more good than bad in our industry and I believe the industry has the skill and willingness to solve odour problems and build a better composting brand.

A few observations and ideas follow:

- 1. Zero Tolerance:** It’s clear that there’s zero tolerance for any off-site odour from composting facilities. We need to understand that (and I mean *really* understand that). Fairly or unfairly that’s the way it is. Zero tolerance also means the industry standing up and self-policing and saying to the consistently poor performers: “You’re not helping us to build our brand and we do not accept this.”
- 2. Technology:** Some would argue that all the required composting technology is available and on the market and that all issues come down to facility siting and facility operation. That may be true but I would suggest that a detailed assessment needs to be made on why compost facilities generate off-site odour and to determine the root cause of this failure. I suspect that odour abatement technologies used at facilities are sometimes insufficient due to inadequately developed technology and/or poor technology implementation. The industry needs to con-

vene a working group to undertake this work and solve these problems.

- 3. Compost Facility Capacity:** The main reason for odour problems at compost facilities are caused by bringing more material on to the site than the technology and odour abatement equipment can manage and exceeding the site’s “carrying capacity.” I know this sounds simplistic and obvious at the same time. On the one hand a compost facility’s “rated capacity” may be inaccurate from a facility performance (i.e., “carrying capacity”) perspective — that is, they generate off-site odours when at or below their rated capacity. There are many factors that can be involved in this including quality of construction, quality of odour abatement equipment, the quality or state of feedstocks received at the facility and the skill level of the compost facility operator. This can also happen when a facility brings in more than their rated capacity on site to make a few extra dollars. While the temptation is great but the downside can be even greater.

- 4. Graduated Permitting:** To better control compost facility operational issues fully graduated performance-based permitting needs to be implemented. That is a Certificate of Approval that would allow a facility to compost a part of its rated capacity in a number of incremental phases and only be allowed to compost its rated capacity once it had clearly demonstrated its ability to operate in a nuisance free manner. For instance a 60,000 tonnes per year (tpy) facility would initially only be allowed to compost 20,000, then 40,000 and finally 60,000 tpy. A regulator could immediately bump capacity down to 40,000 tpy or even 20,000 tpy if the facility creates an off-site odour nuisance and keep it there until problems are rectified to the satisfaction of the regulator. This puts the onus squarely on the owner of the compost facility and their cash flow.

- 5. Increase the Capacity of the Industry:** It’s clear to me that in Ontario at least we have insufficient processing capacity for all the source-separated organics that are diverted. This in my mind has been a great contributor to odour problems. The industry, in cooperation with government, needs to develop jurisdiction-specific plans on required processing capacity (including some redundancy) and work towards implementing high quality capacity and develop a road map on how to meet that capacity. The plan needs to include a way to weed out consistently poor performers.

Conclusion

The industry has come far in the last 20 years. Many industry members have volunteered their time and efforts to make it what it is today. People understand and like to use compost. The majority of composting facilities operate very well and produce high quality compost. However, there’s still work to be done. Elevating the composting brand to the same stature as the compost brand requires concerted industry efforts to resolve technological and operating issues.

It is within our capabilities. Let’s get there in the next five — and preferably sooner.



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