

Small restaurants counter backlash against chains

August 23 2011, By Jane Henion

When large restaurant companies implement sustainability policies, customers are deeply skeptical of the efforts -- and their opinion of those companies may actually diminish. But consumers do give smaller restaurants a nod for their efforts, according to a new study from the Cornell Center for Hospitality Research (CHR).

Michael Giebelhausen and Helen Chun, assistant professors at Cornell's School of [Hotel Administration](#), examined this phenomenon to see how large companies could gain the sustainability credibility they deserve. The study, "Reversing the Green Backlash: Why Large Hospitality Companies Should Welcome 'Credibly Green' Competitors," highlights ways to offset customers' skepticism of "green" restaurant practices.

Giebelhausen and Chu conducted two experiments that found that customers seem to give more [credibility](#) to the green activities of small companies -- for example, using organic or locally sourced ingredients. A key finding is that when customers are aware of both large and small companies trying to be greener, the presence of that smaller [competitor](#) seems to create a halo effect, and as a result, customers' evaluations of the large company's green initiatives improve.

"It turns out that the small company and the large company don't even have to be doing the same thing," said Chun. "When a small, credible competitor is initiating sustainable policies, a large [company](#) can likewise promote their own activities, even when they're different. Apparently, consumers have trouble believing that large companies are

truly being green, even though we know that many chains are working hard on sustainability initiatives."

Assistance for the research study was provided by McDonald's USA, a CHR senior partner.

Provided by Cornell University

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