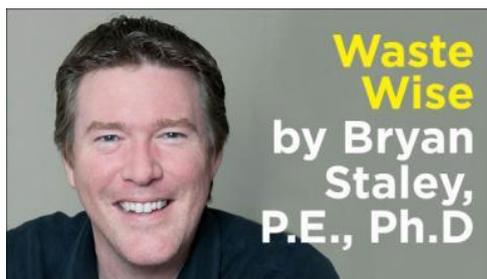


The Arrival of the Waste Industry Data Age

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Having worked outside the waste industry for about a decade as a practicing engineer, the availability of information was always something that I appreciated and that helped me do my job well. For a site/civil engineer, accurate data is critical as it can spell the success or failure of a project.

The importance of accurate data was particularly driven home for me when I designed a large sewer outfall to a distribution center for a major cosmetic company. As part of the preliminary design, the project team collected data regarding the location of anything that might interfere with the proposed layout, such as power lines, storm drains, water supply piping, etc.

It was very satisfying to see the design plans coming to fruition as construction began. Then a call came. The construction contractor doing the installation was in the field, but at a dead stop because they ran into a major fiber optic cable that blocked the designed routing.

The cable line was somehow missed by the locator crews that provided the data used to design the sewer. Having incomplete information halted construction, costing me and my client valuable time and money. Luckily we were able to make quick adjustments in the design and construction resumed after just 48 hours. But the critical importance of having complete and accurate data was imprinted on my mind forever.

In the waste industry, a key criticism is the lack of data or, where data does exist, a lack of accurate information. For example, some operations had no idea how many dumpsters or cans they had in the field while others weren't able to sync their paying subscribers with how many customers had actually been serviced, as well as verifying who they were.

In recent years the conversation regarding the need and importance of data has evolved tremendously. About five years ago responses were mixed, with some expressing how important data was, while others indicated they had a hard time seeing how the additional information might benefit their operations.

In contrast, today it is rare to come across someone who isn't interested in or doesn't see the value that good data can bring to their operation.

The data being gathered can vary from asset management to tracking participation rates to understanding how much tonnage is being managed to determining waste composition. The list goes on. The point is that there is a strong push to acquire data and exploit the knowledge gained to evaluate everything from internal efficiencies to potential competition.

Don't get me wrong, there was always some interest in this before, but what seems to have qualitatively changed is that there is now the ability to easily acquire accurate data in ways we've never seen before. Further, the interest has grown from not only understanding what's happening internally (e.g. data collected specifically by and for a single company), but also externally (e.g. industry-wide) since such information allows a company to understand its place in the world and evaluate trends.

I believe in a few years we will look back at this decade as the onset of the waste industry data age. Given where the industry was a few years ago, I liken the change as going from the Stone Age to the Space Age in a short period of time. As things continue to ramp up in terms of data acquisition and availability, operations will increasingly incorporate the use of not only corporate-specific data, but larger meta/industry-wide data in their operations, forecasting and business development activities.

Additionally, parties outside the waste industry (e.g. waste generators, public, investors, etc.) will increasingly look to this data to gauge what is happening with the waste that is generated.

The larger issue with industry-wide data is ensuring it is credible and fairly represented, lest it could create situations where decisions are made based on skewed or flawed information. Thus, credibility is a significant concern that should be considered when looking beyond the corporate walls for information.

Bryan Staley, P.E., is president of the Environmental Research and Education Foundation, a non-profit research organization that represents the entire industry and has been working to aggregate credible and reliable industry-wide data. For more information on these efforts please contact us at bstaley@erefdn.org.