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FEATURE Environmental Conference Concepts

Design your next meeting with these tips for making the event more environmentally-friendly. **Page 12>**



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KEEP IT ONLINE

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Put conference registration information online only and market it via email and social media, eliminating costly printing and wasteful mailing of a brochure. Reduce printed programs to pocket size and use recycled paper and soy/vegetable inks.

Sustainability, environmentally friendly, going green; these buzz words and phrases are as important today as they have ever been. “Environmental considerations are an increasing part of the conversation for groups planning an event with us,” says Scott Youngblood, general manager of Tigard, Oregon’s Embassy Suites. He adds, “We have a computer program that tracks the carbon footprint of every conference we host. Planners use that information to see the effect of their changes.”

You may think that conducting your event with an eye toward environmental friendliness is more trouble than it is worth. Planning a green meeting does not need to be a complex or expensive project. It may even save time and money.

There are many reasons to make your event more environmentally sustainable according to Nancy Zavada, CMP, Founder and President of MeetGreen, a conference management and sustainable meeting consulting company based in Portland, Oregon. “It makes sense economically, it makes sense environmentally, and it raises your organization’s profile as a good corporate citizen.”

Even small changes can have a big impact. Keep it simple at the start and build on your success. Pick one area of focus, such as reducing waste. Include your sustainability goals and expectations in your RFP, in contracts and in communications with attendees, exhibitors, sponsors and other stakeholders.

Here are more ideas for making your events more sustainable and environmentally friendly.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONFERENCE CONCEPTS

INVOLVE YOUR EXHIBITORS

Place clearly-labeled recycling containers throughout the trade show floor. Ask the venue to provide large recycling bins during set-up and tear-down for the collection of recyclable materials. Encourage exhibitors to reduce collateral and print materials and to use post-consumer, recycled paper and soy/vegetable-based inks. Provide exhibitors with suggestions for environmentally responsible giveaways items and referrals to vendors who produce such products. Ask exhibitors to use recyclable shipping and packing materials and reusable display items.

INVOLVE YOUR EXHIBITORS

GO DIGITAL

Make your conference information virtual by employing a mobile app, allowing attendees to access event schedules, session descriptions, maps, networking tools and more with their smart phone, tablet or laptop. Survey and polling apps take the place of printed evaluation forms. In addition, some of the apps include features that assist with event planning, managing presentation slides, and also integrate with registration systems, therefore saving time.

While the initial shift to digital takes some work, the payoff is huge in terms of improved communication and attendee engagement. The lead time for finalizing program content is substantially reduced and agenda updates can be made instantly. Depending upon the size of your event, and the amount typically spent for graphic design and printing, going digital can save money as well.

If you make the leap to digital, prepare your attendees in advance, by communicating early and often about the change. Offer app stations on-site for people who don’t have a compatible device and provide staff or volunteers to help attendees with downloading the app, creating profiles, and navigating the digital program. Keep your attendees happy by providing an area for charging their devices during breaks.

GO DIGITAL

INVOLVE YOUR CATERERS

GO LOCAL FOR FOOD & BEVERAGE

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Select menu items that incorporate local, seasonal food items. You could commit to a certain portion of the food being organic or local. Ask the chef for a list of those foods and inspect the back-of-the-house to look for the local farm boxes. “We always ask for a certain percentage of local or organic foods to be given to us at no extra fee, and then we will pay more for it after that,” says Zavada. “We negotiate the first 30 percent right into the contract.”

Choose foods with lower environmental impact for production in terms of water consumption, transportation, and pollution—like a Washington State-grown apple instead of bananas from Ecuador. If serving seafood, check that it was sustainably caught or farmed.

PARTNER WITH YOUR VENUE

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Seek out meeting facilities and hotels that meet energy-efficiency building standards, such as LEED certification. And, select venues that have earned independent certification for their sustainability programs by Green Seal, Green Key, EarthCheck, APEX/ASTM or others.

Have you stayed in a hotel that claims a linen re-use program, only to have the housekeeper replace towels that you diligently hung up to use again? Question hotels about their sustainability programs. Do housekeepers adhere to the linen re-use program? Are recycling bins provided in guest rooms? Are soap and shampoo in refillable dispensers or partly-used amenities donated? What energy conservation measures are in place?

INVOLVE YOUR CATERERS

Work with caterers to donate left-over food to a food bank, homeless food kitchen or at the least, send it to a food composting station. Use meeting history and hotel arrival/departure data to better match food orders to projected attendance, cutting down on food waste. Allow buffet serving dishes to become nearly empty before replacing them. “Food waste is a huge issue,” adds Zavada. “Even if your legacy is just that at every single event you donate leftover food to a local food bank, it makes such a huge difference, and it’s not hard to do.”

Ask for reusable utensils and dishes instead of disposables. If that is not possible, then insist on compostable/biodegradable products instead of plastic or polystyrene. Serve condiments like sugar, creamer, and salad dressings in bulk, rather than single serving packets. Eliminate bottled water—ask for reusable cups and water refill stations. Conserve water by requesting that water glasses not be pre-filled at served meals. Request reusable fabric tablecloths instead of disposable paper or plastic coverings.

Youngblood has found a way to eliminate tablecloths altogether. He has found a supplier to provide recycled aircraft-grade aluminum tables for all his meeting and conference rooms. The highly-polished table tops have a fresh, modern design and are easily cleaned. The tables are also extremely lightweight and easy to move around.

THINK GREEN IN YOUR SITE SELECTION

Choose a destination that requires the least amount of transportation for your attendees to get there. Also, try to minimize the distance between meeting space, hotels and services to avoid the need for cars or bus shuttles. Are walking and mass transit options available at the destination?

“Site selection is really important,” notes Zavada. “If you choose a destination that already has recycling, that has a waste water management program, that is a walkable destination and has mass transit to the airport, your job is so much easier as a sustainable event manager because those things are already built-in as opposed to other parts of the country. Take the Midwest, for example, where often those infrastructures aren’t there. The chances of your venue in the Pacific Northwest being involved in sustainable activities is so much higher.”

THINK GREEN IN YOUR SITE SELECTION

PLAN YOUR CONFERENCE MATERIALS CAREFULLY

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It’s hard to avoid producing signage for large meetings, but there are ways to mitigate the impact. Does the venue have electronic signs for posting agenda information? Use recyclable materials for signs, such as cardboard instead of foam board or plastic. Consider making reusable signs for event identification, registration and other routine needs by not putting dates or venue details on them.

Getting Started

Greening your meeting may seem a difficult task, so keep it simple at the start then build on your success. Pick one area of focus, such as reducing waste. Include your sustainability goals and expectations in your RFP, in contracts and in communications with attendees, exhibitors, sponsors and other stakeholders.

Establish methods for measuring results to determine if your efforts were successful. For example, during site selection and contracting, ask the venue about getting the waste diversion rate for the time your group was there. This comes from the venue’s waste hauler, so you need to request it in advance. They can tell you how much of the total solid waste was recycled. Share the outcome in post-event reports and use the information to refine your sustainability program for future events.

Zavada advises, “It can be incredibly daunting when you look at all the different things you can do. Choose one thing. Track that you did it at every meeting, what it saved in environmental impact. Track the economic impact, then measure that and tell your story. Tell it to other industry professionals, tell it to your team, to your members, to your attendees. Share what you’re doing on their behalf. It’s a look good, feel good initiative all the way around.”

CONNECT

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