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Returning the Environment to Green: Putting Green Practices into Action

By Tina Stark, President, Association for Convention Operations Management



Ms. Tina Stark

A decade ago, serious implementations of green practices in any industry were virtually unheard of. Today, every business from accounting to zoo keeping has a green strategy in place. The travel and meetings industry is no exception, and perhaps it feels even more pressure as a business with one of the largest known environmental footprints. But thinking green and doing something to show real results are two very different things. To successfully make an impact on global warming while dually saving their respective organizations money, hotels, event arenas, convention centers and other venues must consider various changes – both behind the scenes of their events and in high-profile, visible ways.

To investigate real-world applications of green practices, I consulted the members of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) on ways they have incorporated environmentally-friendly strategies. The main consensus among the convention services managers (CSMs), sales managers and meeting planners represented in the association is that a combination of innovative “fresh” thinking and a comprehension of a the related monetary savings are important in implementing green meeting programs within venues.

“There is so much talk about planners getting a seat at the executive table. Understanding green meetings is another level of expertise to include in those discussions and strategic plans,” said Amy Spatrisano, principal of Portland-based Meeting Strategies Worldwide and a well-known speaker featured at ACOM and Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) conferences.

In recent years, the meetings industry has become one of the leaders of the green movement, as new and cutting-edge techniques are more quickly accepted and practices are updated from event to event. In addition to the positive environmental impact that is growing in importance worldwide, it is important to also note that in today’s economic climate, a primary main concern is with saving money where ever possible. There is an increasing preference to do business with organizations that are investing in eco-friendly products and services because the long-term benefits have had time to prove a significant return on investment.

“While the cost savings are real, the benefit runs deeper for meeting planners and convention services managers (CSMs) who are also eager to maintain long-term business clients,” said Lynn McCullough, Executive Director for ACOM. “Staying knowledgeable about current trends and being adaptable to a changing culture shows true professionalism. You have to know which practices are appropriate for different kinds of meetings or events. Otherwise it’s a waste of time and money.”

According to the fifth edition of the Professional Meeting Management manual (PMM5), a typical five-day conference with an average of 2,500 attendees uses 62,500 plates, 87,500 napkins, 75,000 cups or glasses and 90,000 cans or bottles. How do you minimize this kind of resource consumption? On top of that, how can you conserve water, energy and carbon emissions? The answer is to integrate green meeting practices at all planning stages – when setting goals and expectations, during behind the scenes setup and in ways that are visible to the attendee on conference days.

Green expectations

Start “talking the talk” by setting goals that have green benefits. As green expectations are being increasingly included in RFPs, keep in mind that planners will seek out facilities that employ linen reuse programs, use energy-efficient lighting and recycle in guest rooms as well as meeting spaces. To really make sure green practices are set in motion, venues need to make green programs known to planners during the sales phase.

The most environmentally-conscious planners will look for LEED-certified facilities, those who have been rated by the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program and regularly consult the Convention Industry Council (CIC) Green Meeting Task Force’s Best Practices for Event Suppliers. CIC’s minimum best practices for accommodations include developing an energy saving plan by getting a third-party energy audit and establishing environmentally-friendly and energy-efficient purchasing policies (including ENERGY STAR appliances, organic cleansers and recyclable paper and plastics). The CIC’s strongly recommended best practices encourage lodging facilities to invest energy and water saving devices such as efficient showerheads, toilets and faucets, as well as programmable thermostats and motion sensors for lighting. “Conference facilities are now going above and beyond and it’s impacting meetings in a major way,” said McCullough.

Hotels are stepping up their participation. According to the Green Lodging Program, hotels on average create more waste in one week than 100 families in one year. Many are now going above and beyond to ensure water conservation, lower energy demand and cut back on waste throughout their properties. ACOM conference speaker and co-principal of Meeting Strategies Worldwide, Nancy Wilson suggests “Green meeting services provide a higher level of service to guests, which can be a benefit to hoteliers.”

Behind the scenes setup

Making attendees aware of green meeting practices you’ve integrated is highly important to increasing the level of acceptance and compliance. However, there are pieces of putting on a meeting that attendees might not even see that can increase your savings. “Reusing plastic floor covers for carpets, recycling pallets used to deliver materials and recycling directional signage are great ways to cut back on waste overall,” said Bob Desautels, ACOM Board member and Senior Manager of Convention Services at the Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association. Others in the industry have also donated surplus food to local shelters or soup kitchens and have contacted charitable services to reuse table centerpieces.

Visible green tactics

A recent survey by J.D. Power indicated that 75 percent of hotel guests were willing to participate in eco-programs, but only 63 percent say they were aware of such programs. Meeting planners, CSMs and hotel executives and representatives should all come together on a plan to increase awareness to attendees at meetings where green tactics were used in order to make these services more mainstream.

“ACOM has chosen binders made of recycled materials over the PVC non-recyclable types for the last three conferences. This year, bags and lanyards were also made of 50% recycled material,” said Desautels. “Anything that uses paper over plastic, such as containers for giveaways, conference material or food products will show attendees that you’ve cut back on waste.”

Meeting facilities can save thousands of dollars by simply offering water pitchers rather than handing out water bottles, for example. At this year’s Annual Conference, ACOM promoted the conference solely by using electronic announcements, linking to the conference website in lieu of the usual conference brochure and agenda. The mass production of handouts to accompany conference presentations was eliminated completely – all conference notes were posted immediately to the website and attendees could choose to print only what they needed to. You can also actively promote environmental concepts and make them visible by educating your attendees beforehand. It is widely known that the travel industry contributes an exorbitant amount of greenhouse gas emissions. At the next meeting or event you are involved with, encourage prospective attendees to play an active role in mitigating this pollution by arranging for carbon off-sets. Commercial and non-profit providers are making it easier for the average business traveler to purchase off-sets to allow for reforestation and other positive environmental influences to help minimize the impact of carbon dioxide emissions caused mostly by transportation. There are many new websites popping up that offer this service such as Sustainable Travel International’s site www.carbonoffsets.org.

The green movement within our business has reached a level of recognition and integration that is unavoidable. It’s the meetings industry’s responsibility to educate ourselves, our business affiliates and the customers we serve on the benefits of green programs. While improving financial outcomes and creating an impact on the environment, CSMs, meeting planners and hotel executives alike can also increase their professional value by becoming green experts.

Tina Stark is the President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) and Director of Housing and Registration Sales for The Housing Connection, an affiliate of the Salt Lake Convention and Visitors Bureau. Tina Stark has been the resident housing expert at the SLCVB for over 18 years and has served on many industry panels for ACOM, the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA), Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) and Passkey. She holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Commercial Recreation with a Minor in Business from the University of Utah. Ms. Stark can be contacted at TinaS@housingregistration.com and for more information about ACOM, please visit www.acomonline.org