

It's Not Easy Being Green...Or Is It?

By Clark Thomas, MPA, CAE

Planning and conducting more environmentally-friendly meetings could prove to be only an association management “topic du jour,” but I’m betting this issue will continue to increase in popularity and importance.

In the words of Kermit The Frog, “It’s not easy being green.” But, if it were easy to “green” our events, would we as association decision-makers take the time and make the effort?

When confronted with this question, we may recoil, thinking:

- It’s too difficult a process to undertake
- I don’t have time to think about this now
- The changes I could enact won’t make a difference in the grand scheme of things

I am embarrassed to say that each of these responses initially crossed my mind when presented with the prospect of greening my meetings. Frustrated by my own closed-minded gut reaction, I willed myself to consider the possibilities and coaxed myself to at least research green meeting possibilities. Much to my surprise, I found that I could take relatively simple actions to positively impact my meetings on an environmentally healthy scale.

While exploring my options, I was fortunate to identify an excellent green meeting resource. The suggestions I received from this colleague regarding opportunities to green my meetings were so insightful and useful, I felt compelled to share what I learned with others.

Following is a summary of key points Kevin Belanger, direct of sales for Shepard Exposition Services (my organization’s general service contractor) and an outspoken advocate for greening association events, made during a recent conversation I had with him.

M&E: Kevin, to start off, what exactly is a “green” meeting?

Belanger: A “green” meeting is a program that has a multi-level framework and action plan which outlines clear objectives as to how the meeting and organization produces an event with the least amount of harm to the environment.

What research has been conducted to measure impact meetings and expositions have on our environment?

A study conducted in 2003 by Meeting Strategies Worldwide showed that a typical five-day conference for 2,500 attendees will use more than 90,000 cans or bottles, 750,000 cups and 87,500 napkins. From an exposition standpoint, a typical 100-square-foot

exhibit booth generates 35 pounds of waste on average, which means a tradeshow of 300 booths can easily generate 1 million pounds of waste.

What indicators do association managers have at their disposal to illustrate that green meetings are a viable and lasting business trend?

Three years ago, it seemed as though there were only a limited number of resources and meeting planners discussing the impact of meetings and waste on the environment. Today, because of rising gas prices, global warming and the media attention being placed on more sustainable products and services, it is apparent that green is here to stay. In addition, the Travel Industry Association of America indicated that 83% of U.S. business and leisure travelers are willing to spend 6.5% more for services and products that are provided by environmentally responsible companies. Also, there were \$2.1 trillions in investment funds committed to sustainability of resources in 2004.

What environmental jargon do associations need to be familiar with to start the process of planning greener meetings?

Three of the most common terms you will hear as you “green” your meeting are **landfill diversion, sustainability, and ecological footprint**. Landfill diversion is finding alternatives to placing items in a landfill or finding ways from the origin to not generate trash. Sustainability is typically used to explain the long-term impact your products, services and policies have on the environment. For example, if you change from sending a paper exhibitor kit to an online exhibitor kit, you have taken a step toward sustainability because you will save trees, ink and waste by going digital. A meeting’s ecological footprint is what is left behind after the meeting is concluded. Typically you can measure your ecological footprint, by gathering data about how much waste you saved from going to a landfill, how many gallons of water were saved by asking your attendees to reuse sheets and towels and how much fuel was saved by using public or mass transportation to get to and from your convention as just a few examples.

What basic steps should meeting or exposition planners follow when implementing a more environmentally friendly event?

There are five basic steps which will help meeting planners begin making their event more sustainable.

1. **Develop a framework.** Define a clear goal and vision for your organization, members and your meeting.
2. **Conduct an audit.** After you set your green vision, review all internal and external departments, vendors, venues and meetings to find out where you currently stand in terms of your environmental practices.
3. **Create a strategic plan.** Set benchmarks along with a one-, three- and five-year plan in how you are going to change your organization and meeting to become more environmentally friendly.

4. **Educate your community.** Disseminate information and your plan to your staff, members, customers and community so everyone has the opportunity to get on board with your vision and program.
5. **Audit your progress annually.** Measure your success and redefine as necessary.

What considerations should planners have with regard to selecting the greenest of venues for their meetings?

As planners search for a venue that best matches their meeting and sustainability needs, they should consider the following:

- Proximity of the venue to the airport, meeting and exhibition space, hotels and mass transit routes
- Green program(s) in place for that city, venue and partner suppliers
- Number of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Certified Facilities
- Willingness of caterers involved in the meeting to develop a waste reduction program for your foodservice

What food and beverage choices can a planner make that will positively impact the environment?

There are several options, including:

- Request washable glasses, dishes, cups and silverware instead of paper or plastic.
- Use buffets as well as beverages in pitchers rather than canned or bottled drinks.
- Donate food that has not been served. Request organic foods for your meal functions.
- Review the caterer's internal green practices and information about the companies they purchase food from for meetings.

What implications can the relationship between an association and its general service contractor have on the execution of a greener meeting?

In most cases, the four key areas to focus in on with your general service contractor are:

1. **Alternatives for print materials.** One of easiest ways to start a green exhibitor program is to switch from "hard copy" kits to either pdf, cd or online kits. In many cases, a general service contractor will produce binder kits that have 100 pages in them. If your exhibition has 500 exhibitors, then you can potentially save 50,000 sheets of paper, plus ink, mailing materials and the waste generated after the manual is no longer needed.
2. **Graphics.** Signs are always needed for an event, but consider using non-themed art and leaving off the dates. This way, you will be able to reuse the graphics for other conventions in the future. If that's not an option, then consider asking your contractor for ink alternatives and substrates that are less harmful to the

- environment. Once you have used signs, donate them to local schools, as teachers and students may be interested in using the back for art projects.
3. **On-Site Waste Reduction Plan.** The trash generated on-site from exhibitor packing materials, scrap carpet, cardboard, crates and other materials can be enormous. Ask your contractor to establish a waste reduction program. In many cases, wood and scrap carpet can be donated and other materials can be recycled or reused.
 4. **Internal policies and vendor agreements.** Find out who your contractor does business with and what green polices they have in place to help you have a more sustainable meeting. In most cases, carpet is one of the largest purchases made annually by a contractor and since carpet is mainly made of petroleum-based products, it can also be the most harmful to the environment. Ask how it is manufactured, shipped, cleaned and disposed of to make sure the process fits into your green policy.

What are most easily executed yet highly effective activities an association or a meeting planner might commit to in an effort to enhance the environmental integrity of their events?

By following these seven steps, you can get your green initiative launched:

1. Find Green Partners
2. Communicate electronically whenever possible
3. Implement a landfill diversion plan
4. Create an energy reduction plan
5. Communicate your vision to your stakeholders
6. Buy sustainable products and services and align yourself with partners that have a similar vision
7. Network in the green community

What additional resources are accessible online for planners when exploring options to green their meeting?

Consider visiting some of these websites to further jumpstart your green program:

- Green Meetings Industry Council – www.greenmeetings.info
- Convention Industry Council – www.conventionindustry.org
- Blue Green Meetings – www.bluegreenmeetings.org
- EPS's Green Meeting – www.eps.gov
- U.S. Green Building Council – www.usgbc.org
- Meeting Strategies Worldwide – www.meetingstrategiesworldwide.com
- Shepard Exposition Services – www.shepardes.com/greenInitiative.asp

(end of interview)

Thanks to the insights that Kevin shared with me, I've come to understand that it is easier "being green" than I had previously thought, and I have begun the process of conducting further research and customizing greening strategies to my own organization. With minimal efforts, I have learned that simple actions on my part, both personally and professionally, do make a difference.

Will my actions alone reverse global warming and save the planet? No, of course not, but they can reduce landfill deposits and promote more environmentally-conscious business standards on the part of my major vendors.

Perhaps more importantly, I've come to realize that *collectively*, the meetings and expositions industry can *significantly* impact the future of our world's growing environmental issues. The first step is to open our minds to the possibilities.

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