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TO GREEN OR NOT TO GREEN

Is there any question?

BY KIM GEORGE

Going green is the right thing to do but it does take some planning. Beyond the argument of the future of our planet, going green is a new competitive edge and a way of differentiating your company, meetings and events from others.

Green meetings have gone from movement to market. Just two years ago, only seven per cent of meeting planners were planning green meetings (*Meeting News Survey*). In 2008, 43 per cent of association meeting planners were planning green meetings (*Meetings Market Trend Survey*).

Hosting a meeting or conference can be costly, yet we all know it is a critical way of connecting employees, sharing ideas, building strategy and learning new skills – especially in the face of challenging economic times.

So what exactly is a green meeting? As a member of the board of directors of MPI's Atlantic Canada chapter, I refer to their definition: "A green meeting is one that uses specific practices in areas including venue, food and beverage, supply chain, transportation, delegate practices and education in an attempt to reduce environmental impact."

MPI suggests the following eight areas when planning a green meeting: 1) destination selection 2) venues 3) accommodation 4) transportation 5) food and beverage 6) communications 7) on-site offices 8) exhibitions. If you're new to the green meetings initiative, start by focusing on one or two aspects and aim to increase your efforts one meeting or event at a time. Before you do anything, be

sure to engage your employer or client in the process – you need their support every step of the way.

It's also very important to communicate to delegates the WHY, HOW and WHAT when it comes to implementing green strategies. Education should be in the language at every stage of the event and, most importantly, a detailed evaluation of the efforts should be outlined in a post event wrap-up. Some companies trying to hold "carbon-neutral" events are asking their delegates to donate the cost to offset their own attendance. This lowers the cost to the company, and allows delegates to take ownership and pride in their personal contribution.

Do green meetings cost more? Save money? The answer to both questions is yes. Until we can improve and hone our green meetings practices, the result right now might be a wash on the balance sheet. Printing fewer handouts, eliminating bottled water and costly conference "swag" will save money immediately, but combine that with sourcing recycled paper products, requesting local food items and increased costs for composting in some cities, and you may find no net result. Remember, it's about more than the bottom line. It's where a single green meeting ends and sustainability begins.

Here are some places to target when navigating the "Go Green" landscape.

Choose a central venue location that's easier for delegates to access by public or group transportation and then build a strong relationship with your venue. They will be key partners in greening your meeting or event

(Look for Audubon Green Leaf™ Eco-Rating and The Hotel Association of Canada's Green Key Eco-Ratings). If you host events in various cities in Canada, be sure to check municipal services with respect to recycling and composting and any additional fees that may apply.

Transportation is one of the biggest offenders, averaging 30 per cent of a company's carbon footprint. By holding your conference in a central location, you can encourage walking from various venue sites. This helps to make your event both green and healthy. Also encourage delegates to offset their carbon footprint for flights and either pay for or encourage speakers to do the same. (A note about carbon offsets: it is one of the most misunderstood aspects of the Green Industry. Do some research and check out one of the newest sites I have found: Voluntary Carbon Standards at www.v-c-s.org.)

"If just one passenger per flight in the world this year reduced their luggage by one pound, they would save enough fuel to fly a Boeing 737 around the world 474 times!" (*Delta-sky Magazine*, Green Numbers, March 2007)

On-line registration is green and it is efficient. Conference or event websites are now more important than ever as they offer both pre and post hand out materials that attendees can download.

"A conference of 1,300 attendees where green practices were implemented can save as follows: using on-line registration instead of printing/postage saves \$3/delegate or \$3,900." (MPI, *The Meeting Professional*, May 2003)

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Be strategic about handouts. In many cases they cannot be eliminated completely. There is very valuable information in the handouts that speakers provide. Offer some guidelines: can the number of pages be reduced and printed double sided on post-consumer content paper? Is there a one-page summary handout that can be distributed with a full handout available on-line? Ask your speakers for their suggestions on how to stay green and keep the content flowing.

“Every ton of recycled paper saves about 17 trees. Recycled paper requires 64 per cent less energy than making paper from virgin wood pulp.” (iD2 Communications, *Waste Reduction is a Smart Business Decision*, Onondaga Resource Recovery Agency)

Change, stress, communication and employee shortages are all topics that land on the agendas of almost every meeting regardless of industry or association. Why not make sustainability a move-forward topic for all future agendas?

Jump drives are another great tool to provide delegate information. They are reusable and compact. You can also load sponsor information on the drives, but be creative and load some special prizes on a number of the drives to ensure delegates look at the information. You want to keep your sponsors happy.

Avoid using dates/locations on event signage so it may be reused. If you have existing AV already in place, project images, sponsor logos and conference information. It can be a creative, cost-effective and very green way to communicate on-site.

Where possible, try to source local food items when menu planning. It means no shipping and less emissions. Plus, you're contributing directly to the local economy. In some cases, purchasing local items can be more costly, but balance it with the long-term benefit and the cost savings in other areas. For example, eliminating bottled water can save approximately US\$50 per attendee for a three-day meeting. (Tim Sanders' book, *Saving the World at Work*)

Use bulk items wherever possible to reduce individual packaging and any disposable items.

“Using 1,000 disposable plastic teaspoons consumes over 10 times more energy and natural resources than manufacturing one stainless steel teaspoon and washing it 1,000 times.” (*Smart Meetings Magazine*, Nov 2006)

Inform your delegates of your efforts so they can embrace the message. Make sure they know carpooling is available, where to recycle, and why your company or association has not chosen to offer costly promotional items. Then be sure to communicate your success. List your green meeting strategies on your website and, on-site, announce how much

waste was eliminated at last night's banquet meal. Establish a volunteer “Green Team” to keep the message clear throughout the event.

Here's a note about “Greenwashing.” While we have made great and credible strides in the green meetings industry, a buyer beware mentality must prevail. Ask lots of questions, read, surf and think green. Align yourself with credible suppliers who share the same commitment to hosting and producing green and sustainable meetings and events.

Regulations and standards are coming. Companies and associations now embracing and understanding the green movement are a step ahead of the pack.

The Canada Organic Label program has been phased in over the past two years by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. In July 2007, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency unveiled the new Canada Organic logo that can only be used on food certified as meeting Canadian standards for organic production.

British Columbia is the first jurisdiction in North America to implement a carbon tax on all fossil fuel and in Leaf Rapids, Manitoba, plastic bags have been outlawed. What's next? Make sure your company or association is ready to meet the challenges and opportunities. Lead the charge. Every step forward is a step in the right direction.

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