



*Helping Organizations
Take the Next Step*

Green is the New Conference

By Kathryn Nudelman

Think back to the last conference you attended. What was it like? Were there lots of handouts? Were they printed on both sides or just one? Was the food sustainably farmed and locally sourced? Were plastic water bottles used?

Everybody's doing it

There's no doubt about it, green is going mainstream and meeting planners for the smallest organizations on up to the Democratic and Republican national conventions are demanding sustainable alternatives to standard conference production practices. No, White House staffers haven't swapped their suits and ties for love beads and Birkenstocks, and neither have the other organizations that are adopting green conference practices. But they have rejected the myths that green is more expensive, less effective and lacking the science needed to back up its benefits. In a post "Inconvenient Truth" society, most of us agree that climate change is real and we have a duty to start reversing the damage ASAP. Even those who don't buy into global warming can agree it's good to reduce, reuse, and recycle because it saves money and protects natural resources. Whether you work on Capitol Hill or Mount Veeder, it's easy to see that green makes good sense for your business, your constituents, and the planet.

Carbon emissions are so passé

Traditional conference and meeting production can be a messy business when you imagine that a week-long event with 2,200 attendees can generate 2,000 pounds of paper waste from meals alone. That's not including the paper from handouts and programs, the carbon emissions from all the single occupancy vehicles, or the leftover food and other waste that ends up in the dump and beyond. Yikes. The same size crowd would, according to the EPA, send close to 10,000 plastic water bottles to the landfill. On the flip side, if water were served from pitchers, without pre-filling glasses, participants could save an estimated 500 gallons of clean drinking water per day!

The good news is that more and more meeting planners are insisting on organic cuisine, real china, and cloth napkins instead of the disposable kind; they're helping

guests coordinate ride sharing and alternative transportation; they're sending e-invitations instead of hard copy, and posting downloadable materials on the web rather than distributing print-outs en masse. They're demanding pitchers and glasses for water, and absolutely no plastic bottles.

Trail blazing

Despite the current barrage by the media touting green everything, real sustainable living is still uncharted territory for most of us. But we're inspired and hopeful about its promise to dramatically improve our world, so we jump in, happy to learn as we go. And quick as we scramble to keep up with the trends and facts, it's easy to fall behind when green technology is evolving faster than policy makers can draft ordinances and provide direction. So what's a socially-conscious meeting planner to do? Before you throw in the organic cotton towel, here are some dos and don'ts to ensure your next meeting is a vibrant shade of green:

Don't:

- Assume a product is sustainable because the label is green. We're in the midst of a social, environmental and economic revolution, and regulations take time to be established. Until they are, consider this the Wild West, where some manufacturers label their products in a way that takes advantage of the green trend, even when they aren't green at all. This is known as "green washing." So it's up to consumers to research before they buy to make sure what they're getting is as green as the claim.
- Bill your conference as green unless you've taken measurable steps to dramatically reduce its carbon footprint. To do so would be green washing.
- Let anyone tell you green is more expensive. Recycled note pads cost the same or less than non-recycled ones, and any increased food costs will be more than offset by what you save by eliminating things like plastic water bottles and disposable table settings.
- Beat yourself up for being less than perfect, especially when you're first getting started. Sustainability comes in shades of green, and even baby steps are worthy of applause.

Do:

- Research on the web, in the newspaper, magazines etc. There's a wealth of information out there to fuel your green conference ideas. You're only a Google search away from sustainable alternatives to conference staples, like compostable plates, cups, and utensils – they look and feel like plastic but they're made from potato starch and break down in a matter of weeks, or local chefs who specialize in organic and sustainable cooking. You can also find clever ideas for themes, decorations, and goodie bags.
- Plan the conference in a location that's convenient to public transportation. You can't give folks a hard time for not taking the bus if your venue is not near a route.

- Choose a venue that meets the majority of your needs. Hotels are nice because everything from the tables and chairs to the food and beverage is in-house, which means fewer cars and trucks on the road toting your party rentals from the warehouse to your location.
- If you do decide to outsource, try and keep it all local. Source food from nearby farms or restaurants, and rentals from vendors with warehouses near the venue.
- Help guests and speakers coordinate ride sharing. You know where they all live, and you can help them connect with other participants who live nearby.
- Create incentive programs, like door prizes or special acknowledgement, for participants who ride share or make other contributions that lower the event's carbon footprint.
- Skip the extensive printed program and materials, and opt instead for a one or two pager with agenda basics. Let your sponsors display reusable signage, and post the rest of the info and acknowledgement online.
- Pass on the plastic water bottles. Use pitchers and glasses (not pre-filled) instead.
- Opt for real, potted plants that guests can take home with them, or other renewable, useful items for your centerpieces instead of cut flowers. If you're crafty, make bouquets out of CFL's (compact fluorescent light bulbs) using green pipe cleaners for stems. Put them in vases, set them on your guests' tables, and encourage everyone to take a "flower" with them to try at home.
- Pat yourself on the back for making a difference.

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