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Three Steps to Sustainable Meetings

The meetings and events industry has clearly acknowledged the importance of adopting sustainable practices. Many of us have implemented preliminary actions; however, when attempting more advanced practices, some are experiencing roadblocks and frustration. These may come in the form of lack of funds, unwillingness to change standard behaviors or resistance from vendors. Or perhaps as a planner you have implemented first steps, but are having trouble taking your practices to the next level due to confusion or information overload.

The following three components are key to greening from the top down. If you couple these with the execution of green practices, the result will be meetings and conferences that have a reduced impact on our environment and engage and educate coworkers and association members.

Securing the Support

Obtaining commitment from executives and board members is imperative to a successful green program. Commitment not only gives authorization to change procedure, it permits contract language and decisions to be made based on sustainable practices for vendors and other services providers.

For some organizations such as Patagonia, United States Green Building Council, etc., corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a major part of their identity and mission. Therefore, sustainable meetings are expected by attendees and all stakeholders. For other organizations, while the impact and importance of hosting a green conference is just as important, the motivation is not as obvious. For that reason, true value in sustainable meetings must first be demonstrated to the organization.

When presenting the need for green meetings to executives, the following points can be used as incentives.

>> Green meetings conserve valuable resources. By using reusable signage, your organization is saving money and resources needed to produce new signs and diverting landfill waste.

>> Green meetings can be more efficient and present many cost savings. For example, the savings from providing water stations or water pitchers versus individual bottles of water (which can cost upwards of \$4 a bottle) is very clear.

>> Employees recognize their company's attention to the environment and the world as a positive benefit.

>> Many consumers, when presented with a choice between two similar products, will choose the one with green properties over the conventional product if all other factors are the same.

>> Adopting a CSR policy can improve a company's public image, possibly increasing sales and loyalty by consumers.

Sharing the Plan

Once commitment is made and a sustainable policy is adopted by an organization, the next step is communication with and education of vendors and stakeholders. This second step is critical because it informs them of the company's or association's CSR and why certain practices have changed. Often, if educated about the benefits of the change, the attendee will be engaged and enthusiastic about participating.

Here are some easy ways to communicate your CSR policy.

>> Send out all communications via e-mail or make available on websites. Explain to attendees that this is an effort to reduce use of paper and the carbon output of mailings.

>> During the request-for-proposal process with vendors, include sustainable practices in your request. Explain that your organization is producing a sustainable meeting and their compliance in this practice is contractual.

>> Seek sponsorship for sustainable practices. For example, instead of using plastic disposable water bottles have a sponsor for reusable water bottles and a sponsor for water stations.

>> Have signage at food stations listing the sustainable elements of the meal. For example: using china, bulk condiments, local and organic food items, etc.

>> Offer a carbon credit option for attendees to offset their travel to the convention. Preferably use a program that benefits the local community.

>> Encourage attendees to inquire further about the sustainable practices of the meeting.

>> Be transparent and straightforward in all efforts.

Measuring the Impact

While the elements of metrics may vary based on the goals and intentions of the event and/ or planner, there are some areas of impact that are more easily tracked than others. Energy consumption, waste diversion and an event's carbon footprint are three basic metrics used to measure an event.

Since each aspect is complicated and composed of several layers, it is important to determine the depth of your measurement prior to the event. For example, when looking at energy consumption, do you simply include venue energy use or do you also include exhibitor and production energy use? Some of these decisions will be determined by the capability of the venue. Generally, an estimate for energy use, based on contracted space and length of event, can reasonably be determined by a venue's electric or engineering department. The ability to provide more data may vary from venue to venue, so ask your venue contact to help gather information. Once this is determined, you may then decide to purchase renewable energy credits or carbon offsets for all or part of the event's energy consumption.

As we all know, events and meetings produce large amounts of waste. Therefore, a comprehensive recycling and/or composting component is critical to every sustainable program. This is also an element of measurement most often asked about by attendees and other stakeholders. In order to single out your event's waste, it is necessary to either contract separate waste compactors or develop other methods of weighing each bag. Coordinate with each venue to establish the most effective method within their operation.

There are several calculators developed to assist with determining carbon footprint. VISIT DENVER, The Convention & Visitors Bureau, recently launched a carbon calculator on its website, www.denver.org/convention/green/carbon-calculator. This calculator is available and free for anyone's use. A planner can determine the carbon footprint of an event overall, and attendees can track their individual footprint of traveling to the conference. With this information, an event or attendee can then purchase carbon offsets equivalent to their carbon output either through the site or a program of their choice.

Once you have determined figures for each of these areas, they can be used to evaluate and establish goals for future events. It is important to not become overwhelmed by implementation of new practices when you are getting started. Instead, view the process as ever evolving. Introduce new elements of sustainability at each conference. If a certain practice was unsuccessful or unpopular, look at it as a learning opportunity and remove or modify for next time.

The important thing as a planner is that you are making first steps, tracking your efforts and setting goals for the future. Together, as an industry, we are redefining what it means to produce green meeting and events.

Get Connected:

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As the sustainable programs manager for the Colorado Convention Center, Lindsay Smith's goal is to help make Denver the first choice for planners organizing green meetings. She provides tools and ideas for producing sustainable events at Colorado's largest convention center.