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Straight talk about sustainability with Jaime Nack

By Lindsay Smith

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While sustainable practices are increasing in popularity and implementation throughout our industry, there are still some basic questions planners have about how to get started and where to go from there. Over the next few months, this column will feature interviews with pioneers of sustainability within the meetings industry. We hope their stories will inform and inspire you.

Our first pioneer profile is of meeting planner Jaime Nack, president of Three Squares Inc. and the director of sustainability for the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

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Jaime Nack, President

Three Squares Inc.

15-year meeting industry veteran

6 years' experience planning sustainable meetings

What do you see as the greatest influence of change within the meetings industry regarding sustainable meetings?

By far, change is driven by rising demand for green venues, alternative transportation options and sustainable [meeting] materials. As an event producer who was requesting these services before "green" made its way to the front page, it is refreshing to see venues and suppliers offer services which would have been seen as a burden in the past. It is no longer seen as an odd request to ask for a linen reuse policy at a hotel or recycling at a convention center. For those newer to the meetings industry, it may seem like these types of practices have always been in place, but for years it was a struggle to get facilities to think about sustainable approaches to operations.

If a meeting planner could focus on only one area of sustainability, where should they get started?

This depends on the nature of your meetings and the types of venues you book. For example, if your meetings tend to be large tradeshows or exhibits in convention centers, implementing a program with your general services contractor to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill and encourage exhibitors to make sustainable choices when packing, shipping, assembling and deconstructing their booths can change the outcome of your meeting's carbon footprint. Or, if they plan small trainings or corporate meetings all over the country, their largest impact on the environment is the high level of attendee air travel (and the resulting emissions from jet fuel). If this is a necessary part of their client's meeting plan, they should investigate developing a carbon offset program for their client which allows the purchase of verifiable offsets to neutralize the emissions from the air travel component of the meetings.

In your opinion, which is better: composting or recycling? How does a meeting planner choose which to implement?

Without a doubt, composting gets the gold [medal] and recycling gets the silver. Composting allows for the capture of organic materials and their returning to the earth as a valuable resource — top soil or fertilizer. From an environmental standpoint, creating a system which prevents waste and includes a full circle approach is superior to one which involves the expenditure of additional resources or carbon output (recycling often involves shipping materials overseas due to the demand for these resources). However, implementing a new composting system at a venue is no easy feat. A composting system at a venue requires the coordination of facilities staff, janitorial staff, catering staff and waste haulers. At the Democratic Convention, we were able to create a front-of-house and back-of-house system to capture compost, and our success was due to the fact that we had the support of all of the parties mentioned above. If the event is on a smaller scale and the resources do not exist to create a system

to capture compost, the next best option is to implement a thorough recycling system. The key to recycling systems for events is clear signage and bin placement. A recycling bin should be placed next to every trash bin in order to eliminate the attendee response of "I couldn't find a recycling bin so I threw my plastic bottle in the trash."

How important are metrics? Can you explain which measurements a planner should focus on?

Just as many clients use post-event evaluations to measure the success of a meeting, collecting metrics allows the meeting planner to measure the success of the greening measures. Especially if there is a sponsor or underwriter for the greening initiative, data collection and producing a final report documenting your efforts helps to provide tangible results. Meeting planners can work with their venues to calculate the event's waste diversion rate (how much waste was diverted from landfill and sent to a recycling center or compost facility). If you are calculating the event's carbon footprint, it is easiest to incorporate questions about attendee travel, exhibitor shipping information and other key factors into the online registration system. This automates the process of calculating the carbon emitted from event-related activities. I am currently working on creating an automatic way of capturing this data with our online registration provider.

In your opinion what is the greatest challenge faced by meeting planners trying to implement green practices?

The greatest challenge is in the range of venues and service providers and being able to find those who are ahead of the curve in your meeting locations. Some cities have a variety of options for green venues and service providers; however, some cities are still trying to implement citywide recycling programs. Hopefully, with the new awareness and buzz around renewable energy and efficiency will come a greater interest by cities, venues and the like to start making steps toward sustainable operations.

What do you see as the biggest misconception of implementing sustainable practices?

There is a notion that sustainable practices always cost more. In some cases, this is true. However, there are several event planning strategies that actually save the planner money: the move from plastic water bottles to a water kit in the back of a meeting room; printing double-sided when necessary or only offering online handouts; selection of a hotel which is either attached or in walking distance to the venue site; [and] implementing a power down policy on all electrical equipment nightly during a weeklong tradeshow. All of these are simple steps which will equal real cost savings.

Do you include language in your RFPs and contracts when working with new vendors? If so, can you give an example of this?

Yes. In all of our contracts, we include language stating that there is a nominal fee on all air travel expenses incurred on behalf of the client. This fee is used to purchase carbon offsets so that all travel on behalf of our clients will be offset with verifiable carbon offset projects. We also have various documents listing our guidelines for catering, exhibit management, etc. which we provide to new vendors and ask for their commitment to follow the guidelines during the event.

Do you have any additional advice, words of wisdom or information to add?

This is an exciting time to be a part of the meetings industry. The wake-up call has been issued, and we now realize we are the second most wasteful industry, behind construction. Meeting planners are in a unique position to go from business as usual to a new and improved way of operating that educates attendees, vendors and clients. I would advise planners new to event greening to spend some time researching products and strategies to find those that work best with your event portfolio.

Feel free to contact Jaime to learn more about sustainable meeting practices at jnack@threesquaresinc.com or call (888) 285-7782.

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