

Earth Friendly

Meeting the needs of groups
and the environment | By Renee Brincks



It's Wednesday afternoon at the Hyatt Regency San Francisco, and 350 meeting attendees have just finished lunch. Back in the kitchen, several culinary team members prep food for an

evening reception with 75 guests, while others chop salad for the employee cafeteria. As a staff member swiftly slices watermelon for the next morning's breakfast buffet, she brushes rinds into a green composting bin. ■ Composting food waste is just one small eco-friendly procedure in place at this Hyatt Regency. Each year, for example, the downtown property also donates nearly 650 pounds of unused soap and shampoo to a nonprofit called Clean the World. Rather than going to waste, amenities are distributed to shelters and families in need.

Conference groups at the Hyatt Regency San Francisco often extend their positive environmental effect with their own sustainable requests.

"We had one group that only wanted food from within 100 miles," recalls Executive Sous Chef Cynthia Motta, who sourced everything from flour to lettuce to meats from local producers. "It was a big challenge to figure that all out and substantiate everything, but it really gave us a sense of what's available."

Increasingly, businesses and organizations are making green and sustainable choices as they plan meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (collectively known as "MICE" in the travel industry). Whether this involves serving water in pitchers rather than bottles, replacing paper napkins with cloth, or putting schedules on smartphone apps instead of paper, even small steps make a big difference. And sustainable conventions and events encompass more than just environmental concerns, explains Meeting Professionals International (MPI) Manager of Events Andrew Walker.

"A sustainable meeting takes environmental, social and economic issues into consideration during the planning process. At the core, it's a

balanced approach," he says.

In addition to conserving resources (often including money) and energy, sustainable meetings can have a positive impact in their host communities and beyond. Walker cites his own organization's 2013 World Education Congress in Las Vegas as an example. During one philanthropic team-building session, attendees assembled prosthetic hands for amputees in developing countries.

"It was a very powerful experience. It just goes to show how you can really touch, move and inspire your audience," he says.

The motivations behind sustainable steps vary by business and association. Some see green meetings as a key component of branding. Others are responding to customer, employee or shareholder expectations. Many simply believe that going green is the responsible choice, in all aspects of business.

"Sustainability is the essence of who our attendees are, so they expect this," says Kate Hurst of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). She helps organize the annual Greenbuild conference and exposition, which draws up to 28,000 construction- and design-industry delegates. Because participants are highly engaged in sustainability, event organizers can implement procedures ranging from carbon tracking and offsetting to mandating Earth-friendly materials in exhibitors' conference booths.

During the 2012 Greenbuild conference in San Francisco, organizers sourced 58 percent of the event's food from within 100 miles. Nearly 86 percent of conference waste was diverted from landfills through recycling, composting and donation programs. Exhibitors donated 9,315 pounds of booth components alone—think carpet, boards and other building materials—to local nonprofits such as Habitat for Humanity.

More than 150,000 individuals registered for the 2014 Dreamforce conference, an annual four-day

By the Numbers

In 2012, 225 million people took part in 1.87 million U.S. meetings and conferences—worth \$115 billion, according to the Conventions Industry Council.



event put on by Salesforce, the cloud computing company, that included more than 1,450 sessions in 18 San Francisco venues. The company's "green team" coordinates sustainable practices and sets related goals together with major suppliers, production companies and venue representatives.

While some of those sustainable efforts require initial investments, they often save money in the long term. By paying slightly more for cardboard signs instead of nonrecyclable foam signs, for instance, Dreamforce organizers ease the environmental impact while also cutting post-conference landfill costs.



Even something as simple as serving water from pitchers, rather than individual bottles, has significant benefits.

"It is almost the same price point, and it also affects the supply chain. As more of us order this sort of stuff, it reduces prices and allows others to choose these items, as well," says Erin Decker, senior manager of sustainability at Salesforce. "We've also moved from bottled water to water bubbler stations. Those do have an up-front cost, but ultimately, we're saving money."

Because those involved in planning and preparing events sometimes have competing priorities, adds Decker, her team's goal is to make incremental change over time.

Savings, by the Numbers

If one attendee chooses to reuse their linens, that saves 1.3 gallons of water. For 5,000 attendees, that's 6,500 gallons.



If one attendee uses recyclable coffee cups, it saves a quarter pound of carbon dioxide. For 5,000 attendees, that's 1,250 pounds of CO2.



If one attendee chooses a reusable water bottle, it saves enough energy to power a 75-watt light bulb for 29 hours. For 5,000 attendees, that's 145,000 hours.



If one attendee eats an apple instead of a banana, it saves 9.25 gallons of water. For 5,000 attendees, that's 46,250 gallons.

Source: MeetGreen's "If One Attendee" tool

"We're not expecting to come in on day one and make everything perfect," she says. "We're looking opportunistically at what we can change now, how we can set a goal for next year and what we can learn."

That measured approach is especially important for professionals new to the green scene. When colleagues first asked conference organizer Jan Sneeegas to make the annual Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) General Assembly more sustainable, she was skeptical.

"I had absolutely no idea where to start and, frankly, I wasn't that excited about it," says Sneeegas. She worried about the costs associated with greening the 4,000- to 5,000-person event, and she feared criticism if the planning team didn't do enough. Still, she agreed to discuss potential steps with a representative from MeetGreen, a Portland-based meeting management firm.

"She told me, 'Let's just take it one step at a time. We really just want you to do the best you can, given the limitations that you have.' That was very reassuring," Sneeegas recalls.

Concerns about the cost and impact of sustainability practices are common, finds MeetGreen Director of Sustainability Shawna McKinley. She suggests taking advantage of resources offered by groups such as the Sustainable Event Alliance and the Green Meeting Industry Council, which support planners, facility operators and suppliers.

Event planners who work with companies such as MeetGreen can gain valuable perspective while refining budgets and navigating options. As she guides clients through decisions and helps them track efforts, McKinley encourages them to share success stories, too. Showing attendees the benefits of carpooling or buying fair trade coffee during a conference might inspire them to make lasting changes in their daily lives.

McKinley also helps clients confirm the green marketing claims made on compostable utensils, biodegradable name badges and other materials, ensuring that clients get what they pay for—and meet the sustainability goals they set.

For that first sustainable UUA General Assembly, Sneeegas and her MeetGreen partners started with modest objectives and eventually began building sustainability requirements into their venue and supplier contracts. Ten years later, at the 2014 event in Rhode Island, attendees voluntarily offset 51 percent of carbon emissions, saved 157,280 water bottles by using refill stations and fountains, and kept 66 percent of conference waste out of landfills through

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composting, recycling and donations.

This June, the UUA event takes place in Portland with even more ambitious green goals—diverting 80 percent of conference waste from landfills, for example. Sneegas emphasizes that making conventions more sustainable is worth the effort, even for groups that are new to the process.

“People may feel overwhelmed by the news about melting polar ice caps and such ... but there are many small steps you can take that really do make a difference, both for your meeting and for the environment.” **m**

Renee Brincks is based in San Francisco.

Green Meeting Tips from the Pros

Research your proposed destination.

“Every place is different,” says Jan Sneegas, who organizes the Unitarian Universalist Association’s annual General Assembly event. Venues and cities have varying capabilities when it comes to recycling, composting and related programs.



Explore funding options.

Reducing waste and conserving resources can help organizations cut costs. But some sustainable measures require an investment. “Some areas don’t save money,” says Shawna McKinley of MeetGreen, “but there are also opportunities for sponsorships.”

Put it in writing.

“If you have it in your contract, it’s on your partner, vendor or supplier to deliver on those pieces, so you don’t have to do all the heavy lifting,” says the U.S. Green Building Council’s Kate Hurst.

Evaluate your materials.

“Ask yourself. ‘What are we building? What are we printing? What food are we serving?’” says Salesforce’s Erin Decker. “And then see where you might make better choices. That’s a really good place to start.”

Start small.

MPI’s Andrew Walker sees planners avoid sustainability because they’re busy and it’s a big concept to address. “But you can start by doing little things that will enhance your events,” he says. “Even one step is going to make a difference.”



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