

IT'S EASY BEING GREEN

by *Julia M. Johnson*
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At the St. Louis Area Meeting Planners International conference in late 2007, St. Louis Convention and Visitors Commission president Kitty Ratcliffe said the world is expecting the United States to turn over a new leaf in the push for environmental responsibility. It may seem like a task as broad as the sky, but "green" experts say even the single meeting planner organizing a small-group event can have a measurable impact on the nation's environment. Planners can step up to the plate by choosing suppliers and venues that are devoted to environmental friendliness and sustainability – and there are myriad ways they can express that commitment together, far beyond just recycling cans or paper.

TURNING GREEN

Jessica Rice Healey, manager of special events for the Arlington, Va.-based environmental protection group Conservation International (www.conservation.org), says her organization often starts small and builds up to bigger sustainable choices in its meeting planning. "Small changes like asking a hotel to offer our meeting attendees ice water in pitchers, rather than small, expensive bottles of water that create plastic waste, have been very successful and easy to execute," she says. "And we always take care to ask a hotel or caterer to offer us a menu that uses local, seasonal products when possible," to lessen fuel consumption and air pollution associated with transporting foods.

Her organization also tries to use organic, free-range and local beef or chicken wherever possible to promote the exclusion of pesticides and encourage responsible animal husbandry. "We have found that hotels and caterers are happy to work with us on this," and those businesses often keep the ball rolling by suggesting similar practices to their other clients, she says.

It's important not to be afraid to speak up when you have a green concern you'd like a supplier or vendor to consider, even if it seems presumptuous. Healey said because her organization does a great deal of work with marine conservation issues, it informs suppliers that seafood products cannot be served at any of its events.

"Our vendors are always interested to hear our reasons for this," Healey says.

"I'm happy to spread our message, and see this as a small accomplishment toward our mission."

Healey says she also asks hotels and meeting halls to provide documentation of their facilities' latest energy audits, and information on what environmentally responsible practices they use.

Not all facilities can provide this yet, she says, but they are beginning to catch on: "They usually comment that I'm not the first person to ask for it. Every vendor I have talked to about these issues has enthusiastically discussed how they can accommodate our requests for sustainability."

GREEN SPOTS

That kind of cooperative spirit is important in choosing an environmentally sensitive location for an event, says Rachel McCalla, owner of Lucky You Productions in St. Louis, a planning company that specializes in "green" meetings.

"You can call organizations like the Earthways Center or the U.S. Green Building Council to get a list of environmentally friendly buildings in your area," she says.

"It's much easier to do a green event today than it was five years ago. The main reason is that more facilities are being built to LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards."

McCalla also advises selecting facilities that use as much locally produced food as possible.

"We are lucky here in Missouri – we have a lot of cows," she says.

"So you can get a lot of great local cheeses and dairy products. And there are plenty of locally produced wines, beer, breads and meats. Instead of bringing in exotic lettuces or other produce, use foods that are in season in Missouri. You may save money because the products don't have to be shipped far. Ask your venue to buy produce from places like St. Louis' Soulard Farmers Market instead of large, out-of-town companies."

McCalla says she also prefers to use restaurants and venues that compost their food waste, and that donate unused packaged foods to charity.

"Most are willing to tell you if they do it," she says.

"If they've got an earth consciousness, they probably already are."

SAVING GREEN

Organizations such as the Convention Industry Council offer myriad ideas on how simple practices can impact environmental issues. The organization has a Green Meetings Task Force that studies how planners, suppliers and venues can support the environment and save money, and it publishes its findings in a periodic Green Meetings report. For example:

- Collecting plastic name badge holders at the end of a 1,300-person event, for reuse at future meetings, can save the event organizer nearly \$1,000 and keep the plastic and metal out of landfills.
 - If a five-day event offers breakfast, lunch, breaks and receptions to 2,200 people on reusable china instead of plastic disposables, nearly 2,000 pounds of plastic won't hit the landfills.
 - If luncheon water glasses are not prefilled over three days of seated lunches for 2,200 attendees, 520 gallons of water can be saved. (Source: Green Meetings Report/Meeting Strategies Worldwide) The CIC encourages planning agencies to follow a number of other specific money-saving practices when putting on an event. They include:
 - Minimizing the use of printed materials. Those that are necessary should be printed on double-sided, post-consumer recycled paper with vegetable-based inks.
 - Providing as many materials as possible in the form of downloadable PDFs.
 - Recycling packaging materials where appropriate.
 - Bringing only what's needed for an event, and taking away leftover materials for recycling so they don't end up in the trash.
 - Choosing decorations and displays that can be reused.
 - Asking venues to provide receptacles for cardboard, pallets, paper, cans, plastic and glass, and making sure maintenance crews are trained to separate out recyclable materials. The council even has best-practice guidelines for CVBs, lodging and cruise operators, event venues, transportation companies, exhibit service providers, food and beverage suppliers and other organizations tied into the meeting business.
- More information on sustainable meetings is available at the CIC's site, www.conventionindustry.org, and at www.bluegreenmeetings.org, the home page of the Portland, Ore.-based Oceans Blue Foundation.

THEY'RE OUT THERE

If you want to encourage others to improve the environment too, sign up with suppliers who value their surroundings. A good example is Enterprise Rent-A-Car, which is rolling out a "carbon offset" initiative across its Enterprise, Alamo and National car rental brands. The program, administered by San Francisco-based environmental consulting firm TerraPass, will allow customers to pay a small fee per rental that will go toward programs to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The rental company also is matching those contributions, says Meredith Perkins, corporate counsel for the company. It's just one of many environmentally responsible business practices Enterprise is undertaking, she says. Stacey Matheson, president of the EcoBrands promotion and merchandising firm in Puyallup, Wash., says even promotional products and giveaways can carry an environmentally friendly message. She recommends asking promotional product suppliers if they're willing to expand their green product lines to accommodate you. One of the biggest producers in the industry is Leed's, a Pittsburgh company that she says has begun making a concerted effort to offer environmentally friendly products. Matheson, whose company serves as a clearinghouse for green products and services, says pens, notebooks, sticky notes and other giveaways can be manufactured from recycled and recyclable plastics and papers. Carryalls and tote bags can be made from polypropylene, which is recyclable, she said, and they also can be made from renewable materials such as organic cotton, jute and burlap. Matheson advises looking for "recycle" symbols on any promotional product you're considering. And Joe Keely, president of the St. Louis-based Promotional Products Association of the Midwest, says many imprinted promotional items such as coffee mugs, letter openers, rulers, key and luggage tags and golf tees can be made from plastics that are corn-based instead of petroleum-based.

"I don't believe this movement is a fad by any stretch of the imagination," Matheson says of the meeting and event industry's growing sense of green.

"Most people really get that it's not temporary. Huge companies are committed to it; so are universities, elementary schools and lots of midsize and small companies. It'll have its hotter moments like any trend, but it's not going away." MM&E



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