Sustainable Event Planning

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One of the ways people working in sustainability communicate ideas and collaborate with others is through the planning of conferences and other events. Sustainability principles can be applied to these events. Known as a "sustainable event" or "green meeting," such an event is organized and implemented in ways that minimize environmental impact, add value to the local economy, and leave a positive social legacy for the host community. Sustainable events have ripple effects, leading by example and inspiring change as they raise awareness among participants, staff, vendors, and the local community.

Before moving onto other planning steps, the first step is to consider whether a meeting is really needed. It might be possible to conduct meeting activities electronically, for example through email or teleconferencing, or it might be possible to conduct several smaller regional meetings to minimize travel and consumption of resources. If it is determined that a face-to-face meeting is needed, then careful planning is required in order to minimize impacts.

Planning and implementation

The steps in planning a sustainable event are similar to the planning steps for other sustainability initiatives. One person should be given responsibility for "greening" the event, together with participation by a team. Together, the team develops an action plan which identifies goals, objectives, deadlines, vendor selection criteria, and performance indicators, and identifies who is responsible for each element. Some organizations begin by crafting a sustainable event policy or green meeting policy to serve as a formal guiding framework. Once a team is organized and a plan is in place, organizers take steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, minimize consumption of energy and natural resources, avoid toxic substances, minimize waste generation, and foster social and economic benefits.

Social and economic factors are considered in addition to minimizing environmental impact. An event can foster social equity through promoting respect for diversity, inclusion of underrepresented groups, universal accessibility for people of all abilities and, where appropriate, use of Fair Trade-certified products. An event can promote economic benefits through a transparent, public procurement and contracting process, supporting local employment, sharing leftover food with a local food bank, and looking for other ways to give back to the local community.

When selecting a venue, caterer, and other supply vendors, it is standard practice to issue a request for proposal (RFP). An RFP and subsequent contracts should include sustainability

performance criteria for vendors. If possible, catering staff and vendors should be considered stakeholders and should be included in the event planning.

Location

Minimizing the environmental impact of a meeting begins with selecting a location. For small and regional meetings within driving distance, organizers can arrange carpooling. If distances are so great that attendees must fly, organizers should look for a host city with an airport that maximizes the number of direct flights and minimizes the number of connecting flights. Participants should be able to travel easily to and from the airport, hotel, and meeting site by public transit, bicycle, or on foot. The meeting site and hotel venues should be near public transportation or within walking and bicycling distance of each other. In some locations, event organizers may need to consider providing a shuttle service. Organizers should do everything they can to make public transportation easy and attractive, first by selecting appropriate locations and then by publishing information about transportation options – including maps, schedules, and instructions – in registration materials, via email updates, and in a central location at the event itself.

Lodging

When selecting a hotel venue, sustainable event organizers often provide a checklist or questionnaire which respondents return with their proposals, with preference given to hotels with higher scores. Preference is also given to hotels which already have green policies or environmental management systems in place. Venues should be able to demonstrate water- and energy-efficient practices. Examples include providing at least some lighting from natural daylight, strategies for minimizing the use of air conditioning, recycling and composting programs, minimal or no use of disposable products, no use of polystyrene cups, use of nontoxic cleaning products, and allowing guests to reuse sheets and towels for multiple days. Organizers should visit hotel and conference sites to verify that their green-event criteria can be met.

Food

Organizers should work with caterers and food vendors to plan meals and snacks, using local, organically produced food in season as much as possible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation, require less synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and benefit the local economy. For food and beverages that must be imported, look for Fair Trade certification. Reduce environmental impact by offering vegetarian options, which require many times less land and water and produce many times fewer emissions than meat. Provide condiments in bulk, and use washable, reusable dishes and cups. Avoid disposable items such as plastic flatware, coffee stirrers, straws, paper doilies, and polystyrene cups. If disposable items are used, ensure that they

are chlorine-free and compostable, and work with catering and venue staff to set up a composting system for food scraps and paper.

Food provides an opportunity to communicate with and educate attendees. Place signs or place cards next to foods that describe where and by whom the food was produced, any certifications, and other details about why this food was chosen. Provide recycling, composting and, if appropriate, landfill receptacles in convenient locations, and label them clearly using colors and pictures.

Have strategies in place to minimize food waste. Using attendee head count, work with the caterer to estimate quantities carefully. A more formal system could ask attendees to indicate meal preferences ahead of time, either within the registration form or in a separate questionnaire. Set up a program to donate leftover food to a local food bank or homeless shelter, if the caterer does not already have such a program in place.

Event material

Minimize paper consumption beginning with registration. Send announcements, 'save the date' information, and registration materials via email and websites, and conduct all event registration online. Make all agendas, programs, handouts, and proceedings available online. Provide printed materials by request only, and if provided, use recycled-content or hemp paper, vegetable-based ink, and double-sided printing. Use recyclable name badges and reusable badge holders, avoid the use of extra ribbons on badge holders, and provide convenient badge-recycling receptacles. If the event requires decorations, artwork, signs, posters, or banners, create reusable versions without dates. Consider packaging type, content, and quantity when making conference or meeting purchases.

For conferences which include trade shows and exhibits, communicate with exhibitors early. Event organizers can include requirements for sustainable practices in exhibitor agreements; since these may be new to some exhibitors, constructive and clear communication is important. Require exhibitors to reuse or take back discarded materials at their own cost. Encourage them to minimize promotional materials. For both exhibitors and other meeting events, eliminate or reduce gifts and favors; if used, encourage gifts that are locally made using sustainable materials.

Climate neutrality

Travel, lodging, food, and various event materials all carry climate impacts. Reduce carbon emissions in every way possible. Calculate the remaining carbon emissions of the event that could not be avoided, then purchase offsets to bring the event's net emissions to zero. Some organizers offer attendees ways to purchase offsets for travel individually, although there is

disagreement over the effectiveness of such purchases. The standards and initiatives in the list of resources at the end of this document offer guidelines and metrics for calculating greenhouse gas emissions for events. See Chapter 6, "Climate" in the book *Sustainability Principles and Practice* for more detailed information about calculating greenhouse gas emissions, mitigation, and offsetting.

Monitoring and reporting

As with all sustainability activities, measurement is essential both to verify that sustainability goals were met and to provide a baseline for improvement in future meetings. Organizers should collect data on greenhouse gas emissions, energy and water consumption, recycling and waste management, and economic impact in the local community. Metrics should also include basic data such as number of attendees and number of days. In addition to technical measurement, provide a questionnaire or survey to attendees to gauge level of satisfaction and to uncover observations and suggestions which might not have occurred to organizers. Be sure to share both successes and lessons learned with attendees, vendors, and the public.

Communication

Planning and implementing a green event is an opportunity to educate and raise awareness for vendors, organizers, attendees, and the local community. Begin by sharing sustainability concepts, goals, and strategies in event announcements and registration materials sent to participants, and in bid invitations and contract materials sent to vendors. Communicate participants' own roles in contributing toward a green event, helping them understand the choices they can make and the implications of those choices. Include information about sustainability concepts, goals, and strategies in the conference program, and provide additional, preferably reusable, informational signage in food service areas and throughout the event. Help participants understand what you are doing and why.

Monitor and collect data throughout the event, and after the event share this information with vendors, participants, and the community. Consider including data such as tons of greenhouse gas emissions avoided, pounds or tons of paper use avoided, number of trees saved as a result of reduced paper usage, pounds or tons of recyclables and composted material diverted from landfills, and quantities of water and energy used and conserved relative to a known baseline. Describe sustainability goals for the event and whether they were met, and discuss lessons learned. Publicize steps that vendors, caterers, and venues took to become more sustainable; consider giving them certificates of appreciation, and recognize their efforts publicly. Show how the successes of the event were the result of everyone, working together.

Resources

APEX / ASTM Environmentally Sustainable Meeting Standards.
http://www.conventionindustry.org/StandardsPractices/APEXASTM.aspx
A set of standards for event organizers, with checklists, strategies, and an implementation guide.

British Standards Institute (BSI). *BS 8901 Sustainability in Event Management.*
http://sustainable-event-alliance.org/how-to-guides/projects/bs-8901/
A British standard for event organizers, including a sustainability management system.

Global Reporting Initiative. *Event Organizers Sector Supplement* (EOSS).
https://www.globalreporting.org/reporting/sector-guidance/sector-guidance/event-organizers/Pages/default.aspx
A sustainability reporting structure for event organizers.

Green Meeting Industry Council. http://www.gmicglobal.org/
Trade organization for sustainable event organizers. Website provides training, best practices, case studies, information about the APEX/ASTM standard, a registry of suppliers with APEX/ASTM third-party certification, and other resources.

Green Seal. *Certified Hotels and Lodging Properties.*
http://www.greenseal.org/FindGreenSealProductsandServices/HotelsandLodgingProperties.aspx
A database of US hotels and lodging sites certified by Green Seal, searchable by location.

ISO 20121 Event Sustainability Management Systems.
http://www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/catalogue_tc/catalogue_detail.htm?csnumber=54552
A comprehensive sustainability management system for event organizers.

Sustainable Event Alliance. http://sustainable-event-alliance.org/
A global organization of event organizers. Website offers links to standards, reporting frameworks, how-to guides, databases of suppliers and venues, and other resources.

UN Environment Programme (UNEP), ICLEI: Local Governments for Sustainability, and International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP). *Sustainable Events Guide: Give Your Large Event a Small Footprint.* Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 2012.
Detailed information and guidelines for making large-scale meetings as sustainable as possible.