

# It's Not Easy Being Green...

BY CLARK THOMAS, MPA, CAE

**PLANNING AND CONDUCTING** more environmentally-friendly meetings could prove to be only an association management "topic du jour," but I'm betting this issue will continue to increase in popularity and importance.

In the words of Kermit the Frog, "It's not easy being green." But if it were easy to "green" our events, would we as association decision makers take the time and make the effort?

When confronted with this question, we may recoil, thinking

1. It's too difficult a process to undertake.
2. I don't have time to think about this now.
3. The changes I could enact won't make a difference in the grand scheme of things.

I am embarrassed to say that each of these responses initially crossed my mind when presented with the prospect of greening my meetings. Frustrated by my own closed-minded gut reaction, I willed myself to consider the possibilities and coaxed myself to at least research green meeting options.

Much to my surprise, I found that I could take relatively simple actions to positively impact my meetings on an environmentally-healthy scale.

While exploring my options, I was fortunate to identify an excellent green meeting resource. The suggestions I received from this colleague regarding opportunities to green my meetings were so insightful and useful, I felt compelled to share what I learned with others.

The following is a summary of key points that Kevin Belanger, director of sales for Shepard Exposition Services and an outspoken advocate for greening association events, made during a recent conversation I had with him.

## **TO START OFF, WHAT EXACTLY IS A "GREEN" MEETING?**

A green meeting is a program that has a multilevel framework and action plan that outlines clear objectives as to how the meeting and organization produces an event with the least amount of harm to the environment.

## **WHAT RESEARCH HAS BEEN CONDUCTED TO MEASURE THE IMPACT THAT MEETINGS AND EXPOSITIONS HAVE ON OUR ENVIRONMENT?**

A study conducted in 2003 by Meeting Strategies Worldwide showed that a typical five-day conference for 2,500 attendees will use more than 90,000 cans or bottles, 75,000 cups and 87,500 napkins. From an exposition standpoint, a typical 100-square-foot exhibit booth generates 35 pounds of waste on average, which means a tradeshow of 300 booths can easily generate more than five tons of waste.

## **WHAT INDICATORS DO ASSOCIATION MANAGERS HAVE AT THEIR DISPOSAL TO ILLUSTRATE THAT GREEN MEETINGS ARE A VIABLE AND LASTING BUSINESS TREND?**

Three years ago, it seemed as though there were only a limited number of resources and meeting planners discussing the impact of meetings and waste on the environment. Today, because of rising gas prices, global warming and the media attention being placed on more sustainable products and services, it is apparent that green is here to stay. In addition, the Travel Industry Association of America indicated that 83 percent of U.S. business and leisure travelers are willing to spend 6.5 percent more for services and products that are provided by environmentally-responsible companies. Also, there was \$2.1 trillion in investment funds committed to sustainability of resources in 2004.

## **WHAT ENVIRONMENTAL JARGON DO ASSOCIATIONS NEED TO BE FAMILIAR WITH TO START THE PROCESS OF PLANNING GREENER MEETINGS?**

Three of the most common terms you will hear as you green your meeting are landfill diversion, sustainability and ecological footprint. **Landfill diversion** is finding alterna-

tives to placing items in a landfill or finding ways from the origin to not generate trash. **Sustainability** is typically used to explain the long-term impact your products, services and policies have on the environment. For example, if you change from sending a paper exhibitor kit to an online exhibitor kit, you have taken a step toward sustainability because you will save trees, ink and waste by going digital. A meeting's **ecological footprint** is what is left behind after the meeting is concluded. Typically you can measure your ecological footprint by gathering data about how much waste you saved from going to a landfill, how many gallons of water were saved by asking your attendees to reuse sheets and towels, and how much fuel was saved by using public or mass transportation to get to and from your convention, as just a few examples.

## **WHAT BASIC STEPS SHOULD MEETING OR EXPOSITION PLANNERS FOLLOW WHEN IMPLEMENTING A MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY EVENT?**

There are five basic steps that will help meeting planners begin making their events more sustainable:

1. Develop a framework. Define a clear goal and vision for your organization, members and your meeting.
2. Conduct an audit. After you set your green vision, review all internal and external departments, vendors, venues and meetings to find out where you currently stand in terms of your environmental practices.
3. Create a strategic plan. Set benchmarks along with one-, three- and five-year plans on how you are going to change your organization and meeting to become more environmentally-friendly.
4. Educate your community. Disseminate information and your plan to your staff, members, customers and community so everyone has the opportunity to get on board with your vision and program.





nies he or she purchases food from for meetings.

### WHAT IMPLICATIONS CAN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AN ASSOCIATION AND ITS GENERAL SERVICE CONTRACTOR HAVE ON THE EXECUTION OF A GREENER MEETING?

In most cases, the four key areas to focus on with your general service contractor are

1. *Alternatives for print materials.* One of the easiest ways to start a green exhibitor program is to switch from "hard copy" kits to either PDF, CD or online kits. In many cases, a general service contractor will produce binder kits that have 100 pages in them. If your exhibition has 500 exhibitors, you can potentially save 50,000 sheets of paper, plus ink and mailing materials, and the waste generated from the binder kits is no longer needed.
2. *Graphics.* Signs are always needed for an event, but consider using nonthemed art and leaving off the dates. This way, you will be able to reuse the graphics for other conventions in the future. If this is not an option, consider asking your contractor for ink alternatives and substrates that are less harmful to the environment. Once you have used signs, donate them to local schools, as teachers and students may be interested in using the backs for art projects.
3. *On-site Waste Reduction Plan.* The trash generated on-site from exhibitor packing materials, scrap carpet, cardboard, crates and other materials can be enormous. Ask your contractor to establish a waste-reduction program. In many cases, wood and scrap carpet can be donated and other materials can be recycled or reused.

4. *Internal policies and vendor agreements.* Find out who your contractor does business with and what green policies he or she has in place to help you have a more sustainable meeting. In most cases, carpet is one of the largest purchases made annually by a contractor, and since carpet is mainly made of petroleum-based products, it also can be the most harmful to the environment. Ask how it is manufactured, shipped, cleaned and disposed of to make sure the process fits into your green policy.

5. Audit your progress annually. Measure your success and redefine as necessary.

### WHAT CONSIDERATIONS SHOULD PLANNERS HAVE WITH REGARD TO SELECTING THE GREENEST OF VENUES FOR THEIR MEETINGS?

As planners search for venues that best match their meeting and sustainability needs, they should consider the following:

1. Proximity of the venue to the airport, meeting and exhibition space, hotels and mass transit routes.
2. Green program(s) in place for the city, venue and partner suppliers.
3. Number of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)-certified facilities.

4. Willingness of caterers involved in the meeting to develop a waste-reduction program for your food service.

### WHAT FOOD AND BEVERAGE CHOICES CAN A PLANNER MAKE THAT WILL POSITIVELY IMPACT THE ENVIRONMENT?

There are several options, including

1. Request washable glasses, dishes, cups and silverware instead of paper or plastic.
2. Use buffets, as well as beverages in pitchers, rather than canned or bottled drinks.
3. Donate food that has not been served. Request organic foods for your meal functions.
4. Review the caterer's internal green practices and information about the compa-

**WHAT ARE THE MOST EASILY EXECUTED, YET HIGHLY EFFECTIVE, ACTIVITIES ASSOCIATION OR MEETING PLANNERS MIGHT COMMIT TO IN AN EFFORT TO ENHANCE THE ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRITY OF THEIR EVENTS?**

By following these seven steps, you can get your green initiative launched:

1. Find green partners.
2. Communicate electronically whenever possible.
3. Implement a landfill diversion plan.
4. Create an energy-reduction plan.
5. Communicate your vision to your stakeholders.
6. Buy sustainable products and services, and align yourself with partners that have a similar vision.
7. Network in the green community.

**WHAT ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ARE ACCESSIBLE ONLINE FOR PLANNERS WHEN EXPLORING OPTIONS TO GREEN THEIR MEETINGS?**

Consider visiting some of these Web sites to further jumpstart your green program:

1. Green Meetings Industry Council, [www.greenmeetings.info](http://www.greenmeetings.info)
2. Convention Industry Council, [www.conventionindustry.org](http://www.conventionindustry.org)
3. Blue Green Meetings, [www.bluegreenmeetings.org](http://www.bluegreenmeetings.org)
4. EPA's Green Meeting, [www.epa.gov/oppt/greenmeetings](http://www.epa.gov/oppt/greenmeetings)
5. U.S. Green Building Council, [www.usgbc.org](http://www.usgbc.org)
6. Meeting Strategies Worldwide, [www.meetingstrategiesworldwide.com](http://www.meetingstrategiesworldwide.com)
7. Shepard Exposition Services, [www.shepardes.com/greenInitiative.asp](http://www.shepardes.com/greenInitiative.asp)

Thanks to the insights that Kevin shared with me, I've come to understand that it is easier "being green" than I had previously

thought, and I have begun the process of conducting further research and customizing greening strategies within my own organization. With minimal efforts, I have learned that simple actions on my part, both personally and professionally, do make a difference.

Will my actions alone reverse global warming and save the planet? No, of course not, but they can reduce landfill deposits and promote more environmentally-conscious business standards on the part of my major vendors.

Perhaps more importantly, I've come to realize that *collectively*, the meetings and expositions industry can *significantly* impact the future of our world's growing environmental issues. The first step is to open our minds to the possibilities. ●

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