

How the Meetings Industry Has Become More Paperless, Less Wasteful and More Efficient

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By Eric Blanc, President, ACOM

Having some type of green meeting practices in place continues to be an important area of focus for venues in the meetings industry, as a business with one of the largest environmental footprints. In order to successfully have an effect on global warming while reducing costs and saving their respective organizations money, convention centers, hotels and other venues continue to examine how to successfully make these changes—both behind the scenes of their events and in visible ways.

With innovative techniques being quickly accepted and practices updated from event to event, planners continue to look to their meetings partners as leaders in sustainability. It is becoming increasingly important to conduct business with organizations that are investing in eco-friendly products and services. To that end, the long-term benefits yield a significant return on investment.

Members of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) recently shared their perspectives on green meeting practices and what their respective venues are doing to stay competitive in the marketplace.

Meeting Client's Demands

Many customers are expecting facilities to have green initiatives in place. According to David Dvorak, CMP, vice president of Catering and Convention Services at the Starwood Hotels and Resorts, he is continuing to see more and more of a demand for green meeting practices from clients especially in the RFP process. "Having green meeting practices, for many companies, is a point of entry," he said. "We have outlined about 20 sustainable meeting practices at Starwood that hit key areas that customers care about. Many clients won't even consider your venue unless you have these practices in place."

Tiffany Hoambrecker, green meeting liaison and associate director, convention services at VISIT DENVER, indicates these types of requests vary depending on the sophistication level of the meetings sustainability efforts. "We see everything from simple requests such as 'Do you recycle?' to more advanced questions such as 'What is your diversion rate?'" she said. "The exciting thing is that meeting planners are asking the questions."

Which Green Meeting Practices Are Right For You?

It is important for convention centers, hotels and other venues to determine which sustainable practices best fit their respective organizations and ultimately meet the needs of their clients and have the most impact on their bottom line. “We have had a tremendous amount of impact with our clients by going paperless. The distribution of our banquet event orders is all done electronically,” said Dvorak. “On the operational side, we have Starwood eMenus and ePlanner that provide meeting planners with online menu ordering as well as information about a specific hotel. We also have local and organic food offerings within our eMenus. We continue to focus on reducing the amount of water used during meetings and we are starting to quickly ramp up on linenless tables on the banquet and meetings side.”

In addition to these options, Starwood also sees value in providing socially conscious events in-house for meeting planners. According to Dvorak, planners especially in the corporate sector have internal initiatives which they are now requiring to be part of their meetings to give back to the community. “At Starwood, we make these available as part of our Planner’s Edge On-Site Specialty Events which allows the planner to have these events right on property, helping to reduce their customers’ carbon footprint by eliminating transportation to an off-site venue,” he said.

The Colorado Convention Center recently became a LEED Certified Existing Building in Operation and Maintenance, according to Hoambrecker. “In order to achieve this certification from the U.S. Green Building Council, our convention center had to go through a serious evaluation of our daily operation practices,” she said. Some of the highlights included: single stream recycling throughout the entire venue, adding a 300 kilo-watt solar array to the roof, monitoring its light usage and capitalizing on all of the natural sunlight that comes into the facility, installing water saving plumbing fixtures such as low-flush toilets and donating left over convention materials to local non-profits.

Implementing Energy-Efficient Practices

The industry continues to see facilities retrofitting their lighting fixtures as they look for ways to decrease expenses and create better efficiencies. Many venues are also participating in the conversion to timer or motion sensor lighting fixtures. “Our properties are getting fit with motion sensors and other energy saving devices not just in the meeting space, but also in our guest rooms,” said Dvorak. “We also have Element, our new LEED certified hotel brand, which is an extended stay type of hotel.” These hotels, according to Dvorak, have become a laboratory for new and cutting edge sustainability offerings focusing on savings in both electricity and water.

“Most often meeting planners are dependent upon the facility or their vendors in regards to energy efficiency,” Hoambrecker said. “This is where the RFP process becomes important so meeting planners are choosing the destinations or the vendors based on what they can offer the meeting planner.”

Utilizing Technological Advancements

To take their meetings a step further, meeting planners are utilizing green practices to help elevate their attendees’ event experience, especially through the use of technology. “We are starting to see a lot of meetings create their own meeting specific mobile application. This provides attendees with a variety of information from the agenda to local maps to restaurant information,” Hoambrecker said.

Dvorak agreed and added, “We are starting to see many more applications being added to smart phones as many people are now carrying the iPad and Blackberry—people aren’t carrying around paper anymore,” said Dvorak. This area will be explored more and more over the next 12-19 months, with the goal of having meeting planners communicate via the application with customers, according to Dvorak.

Many conventions are offering their attendees the option to sign up for their convention text messaging program, providing them with important updates or schedule changes, according to Hoambrecker. “Conventions are also starting to use more social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter to promote their meeting before the conference,” she said.

The industry is moving towards less distribution of hard materials at conferences and meetings and the majority of the groups phasing out paper are choosing to distribute their information through these technological methods to save time and money.

The Future of Sustainability

Over the next few years, the meetings industry will continue to move toward implementing sustainable practices into their venues in the form of updating older lighting fixtures with more efficient lighting fixtures that increase yield but decrease energy consumption, placing sensors on lighting fixtures throughout the facility to ensure lights are turned off when not in use as well as adding spring loaded plumbing fixtures in restrooms to cut down water usage.

“Offering attendees sustainable dine-around options to restaurants who embrace the farm to table experience, donating conference materials or office supplies to local charities and incorporating a community service project into the meeting,” said Hoambrecker, are all green meeting trends that are up and coming in the industry. Convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) websites are also starting to feature how cities are becoming green—which also appeals to environmentally-conscious meeting planners.

Overall, it is important for the meetings industry to continue to implement new green meeting practices into their venues and cities and expand existing procedures to help reduce the industry’s environmental footprint, but also to add more to their customer’s bottom line and overall meeting experience, creating the ultimate reward: customer loyalty.

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Eric Blanc is the President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) and is a tenured professional with over 18 years of experience in the hospitality industry. He is the Director of Sales and Marketing for the Tampa Convention Center in Tampa, Florida after serving as a National Sales Manager with the Freeman Companies, based in Orlando, Florida. Prior to his time at the Freeman Companies, Eric served as Senior Convention Services Manager at the Tampa Convention Center and Tropicana Field (formerly known as the Florida Suncoast Dome) in St. Petersburg, Florida. Eric is actively involved in the hospitality industry and is a member of NCBMP (National Coalition of Black Meeting Planners) and PCMA (Professional Convention Management

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