



GREEN MEETINGS:

THE STARTING POINT

There are lots of resources to help you plan more sustainable meetings, but few are on the same page. Here's how you can start the green planning process.

By Lisa Plummer



SMG-managed facilities such as the Colorado Convention Center in Denver have instituted a green meetings program, giving planners a place to begin when organizing events.

The meeting and convention industry has made some eco-friendly strides in recent years, including establishing the soon-to-be-released APEX/ASTM Environmentally Sustainable Meeting Standards. Despite this progress, the green meetings arena is still a confusing place to be. The long-awaited standards are intended to clearly define what a green meeting is and create more consistency across the industry, but until its release and adoption, planners of green events must contend with a wide array of venue

and hotel-related environmental standards and certification programs. Even after the standards are released, planners may find themselves questioning whether to abide by their own guidelines or a venue's guidelines. More and more planners have the desire to go green, but knowing how to begin organizing a sustainable event can be an overwhelming proposition, especially for planners new to this arena.

"I think everyone all over the world is confused about which standard should

take precedence over the other and how to incorporate all of them if you don't want to take favorites," says Jamie Nack, owner of Three Squares Inc., an environmental consulting firm that produces green meetings. "Hopefully the APEX standard will help create some consistency and help clear up some of the confusion." In the meantime, a number of industry experts share their advice about how to weed through the options and make sound choices to help you plan green meetings.

IT'S UP TO YOU

Before planners become immersed in the different standards and certifications, they need to start by looking at their own organizations, says Nancy Zavada, principal of MeetGreen, a sustainability consulting firm. Examining your environmental mission, setting a sustainability policy and creating a green checklist is the best place to begin your green journey, she advises.

"Different organizations have different things that are important to them, so ask what's really vital to your organization," says Zavada. "Every organization or event should have a list of things that are very vital to them that they won't waver from, so when you talk to the venue or do an RFP, these are your requirements."

If coming up with your own checklist intimidates you, do some research and look for existing standards or guidelines to use as a template, advises Brittin Witzenburg, sustainability coordinator of the Oregon Convention Center in Portland.

"Use some standards or references that already exist. There's no point in totally reinventing the wheel," says Witzenburg.

"APEX isn't the only standard or checklist, so in many ways, a lot of it is upon the planners to educate themselves on what's out there and what they feel or their organizations feel is most important."

Start small by picking four or five green practices that matter most to you and stick with them, even if a venue or hotel has its own environmental policies in place that differ from yours. A good provider will be willing to work with you and do whatever they can to help you achieve your goals, says Lindsay Arell, sustainable program director at the Colorado Convention Center in Denver.

"If a hotel or venue is saying, 'This is what we're doing,' it's great that they're making the effort and educating clients, but if there's something missing from those practices that you'd like to have or have experienced in other venues, you need to ask for that," says Arell. "Communicate and collaborate."

IT'S UP TO THE VENUE

When you have environmental priorities in place, you can begin to seek out green

providers. How do you know if a venue, hotel or vendor is really green and not just "greenwashing," or pretending to be green to benefit their bottom lines? This is where third-party environmental certification programs can serve as helpful guideposts. It's essential to do your homework, be discerning and ask a lot of strategic questions, but certification programs can help guide you toward the right green partnerships, says Nack.

"You can look for certifications as a way to cue you in to the point that at least the management on the hotel or venue side has recognized that this is important to them," says Nack. "It's a good indicator that there's some buy-in from management there, but you might want to dig a little bit deeper to find out if the practices are in line with the certification or with what you're looking for in terms of a venue partner."

When choosing a green venue, it doesn't hurt to look for facilities that have pulled out the big guns: Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. Created by the U.S.

Problems Solved

Many people still believe green meetings are more complicated and more expensive than standard events. On average, choosing greener options actually saves you money and helps you find extra dollars in your budget to pay for things that do cost a little more, such as organic food. Here are solutions to some of the most common green complaints:



PROBLEM: Not every venue offers recycling.

SOLUTION If your venue doesn't have a recycling infrastructure in place, try offering recycling sponsorships, which can be very popular with companies looking to brand themselves as green. Such sponsorships can support installing a temporary waste diversion system, including bringing in recycling receptacles and

contracting a waste hauler to pick up recycling and compost after the event.

PROBLEM: Attendees complain when water bottles are replaced with water dispensers.

SOLUTION Stopping bottled water is the easiest low-hanging fruit when it comes to saving money and going green. (Bottled water can cost more than \$5 per bottle at many conference and convention centers.) Educate attendees on the amount of money and resources saved by going without plastic. Encourage them to carry reusable water bottles at the event and focus on opportunities where bulk water pitchers or dispensers make the

most sense, such as at education or work sessions.

PROBLEM: Eco-friendly promotional items are more expensive.

SOLUTION With increased demand and competition, prices are coming down. Make a point of checking in with vendors every six months to see if pricing has changed. Otherwise, consider eliminating traditional promotional items altogether. Do your attendees really need or want another pen?

PROBLEM: It's hard to find a venue that can properly dispose of or compost biodegradable name badge holders.

SOLUTION If the facility doesn't have a composting



In Portland, a light-rail train stops in front of the Oregon Convention Center, a LEED-certified meeting facility.



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—Brittin Witzenburg,
Sustainability Coordinator

Green Building Council, this internationally recognized benchmark has been earned by approximately 20 convention centers and more than 100 hotels in the U.S., according to the USGBC.

Although LEED certification shouldn't be a planner's sole criteria for selecting a venue, it does demonstrate that a property or facility has made a serious investment and commitment to sustainability, says Matt Pizzuti, director of marketing for the Oregon Convention Center.

"It's easy to say you're green, but any facility that has a commitment to greening—a true dollars-on-the-table commitment—is going to be LEED certified,"

says Pizzuti. "That is a benchmark that we see as a baseline for the venue side."

Besides LEED, you can also look for SMG-managed convention facilities participating in SMG Green IMPACT, SMG Worldwide's new corporate-wide greening program designed to help SMG-managed facilities initiate or further their greening practices in the areas of waste, energy, water and air quality. Modeled after the APEX/ASTM standard and designed to complement LEED, the voluntary program was launched late last year with the intent to create consistency and uniformity across SMG's 225 facilities in North America, including 68 convention centers, according to Arell, sustainability director and brainchild of SMG Green IMPACT.

"One of the areas of focus will be making sure all facilities are measuring the same thing and have the same best practices in place, so if an SMG facility says it has recycling, there's a consistent way it will approach and track it," says Arell. "So when planners go into an SMG facility and recognize the SMG

program, find an option for reusing badges, either internally or by donation. You can often get two or three uses out of badges, so for easy collection, make sure to supply a basket or bin with clear signage where attendees can drop their badges after the event.

PROBLEM: Speakers and attendees still expect printed handouts.

SOLUTION If printing is absolutely necessary, find ways to reduce. Offer a printed conference at-a-glance versus an entire conference program; prioritize important documents and use two-sided printing and post-consumer recycled paper whenever possible. Continue to provide elec-

tronic copies of programs, sessions and PowerPoints conveniently (and early) to promote your efforts.

PROBLEM: The return rate on session evaluations is much greater via paper slips versus the event's mobile app.

SOLUTION Send out evaluations via email to registered attendees immediately following the event and incentivize them with a prize. If that's not an option, use half sheets of paper or combine sessions on one page. Use post-consumer recycled paper and recycle evaluations after they're analyzed.

PROBLEM: Excess promo materials cost money to

ship back to the office and then have to be distributed and/or donated.

SOLUTION Take time to estimate your needed quantities as accurately as possible to avoid excess materials. Plan ahead with available local donor options or ask the venue if they already work with organizations or have suggestions. Consider materials that can be reused for the next event.

PROBLEM: Some convention centers charge a fee to donate unused convention food to local shelters.

SOLUTION Depending on their health code policies, some venues cannot donate unused food. For those who can, there

shouldn't be a charge. Most food recovery organizations are willing to pick up donations when planned ahead of time and can often provide collection volunteers when needed. Discuss this with the convention services manager.

PROBLEM: Organic food is more expensive.

SOLUTION Look at your overall food and beverage budget to see what costs more and what costs less, then get creative. For example, if you cut the size of meat portions down, you will have extra money for organic produce.

Sources: Brittin Witzenburg, OCC; Jamie Nack, Three Squares Inc.; Nancy Zavada, MeetGreen

Attendee Pushback

You managed to eliminate plastic water bottles and paper at your last meeting (yay!), but some of your attendees weren't too happy about it (boo!). Attendee pushback comes with the territory any time major changes are made at meetings and events. You can't force people to want to go green, but there are ways to inspire them to be more enthusiastic about your environmental vision. Here are a few tips to get your attendees on the green bandwagon:

- 1 EMPHASIZE EDUCATION:** Attendee education, especially pre-event, is vital when beginning your green meetings mission. Publicize and promote the sustainable practices you'll be implementing several months in advance on your website and in communication materials so attendees know what to expect.
- 2 START SLOW:** People tend to push back because change is hard and something new and unfamiliar can be overwhelming. But when it comes to environmental consciousness, we all need to start somewhere, so make the transition easier by picking one green practice, doing it well, figuring out how much it saved and building from there.
- 3 GIVE KUDOS:** Make attendees feel good about what they helped accomplish by making a point of publicizing what was saved at the event. After you've done your post-event metrics, give attendees concrete examples. For example, tell them how many Olympic swimming pools could be filled with the water saved.

Source: Nancy Zavada, principal of MeetGreen

Green IMPACT program, they will have an understanding of how comprehensive that sustainability program really is."

IT'S UP TO THE HOTEL

Although choosing hotels that are LEED-certified is a great way to reduce the environmental impact of your meeting, LEED can be cost-prohibitive. "For hotels, it's a different ballgame because LEED is a big investment, so if you're a chain and you have 600 hotels, making them LEED certified is a daunting proposition," says Pizzuti. "So I can understand why they've gone to a Green Seal certification, which is also a third-party, vetted program for hotels, but it's a far less costly program than LEED."

Besides Green Seal, keep an eye out for third-party environmental certification through Green Key Global, Green Globe and Energy Star, as well as ISO 14001 certification, an internationally recognized standard for quality and environmental management. Many larger hotel brands have also developed their own internal greening and energy conservation programs, including Hilton Worldwide, Marriott International, Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, Omni Hotels and Resorts, and Gaylord Hotels and Convention Centers.

"It's important to realize not every hotel is going to adopt the same certification program or strive to meet consistent standards because there are so many options out there," says Wendy Scott, national account manager of Experient, which provides green site selection services for events. "However, as time goes on, certain programs such as LEED and Green Seal have emerged as leaders and you become able to discern different certifications faster. Internal programs implemented within different hotel brands also offer some very solid private standards, which should also be taken into high consideration."

But whether a venue or hotel has its own progressive programs, LEED or any other third-party certification, what matters most is that the provider is willing to work with planners to help achieve sus-



tainable objectives. "It's a collaborative effort between a venue and a supplier and meeting planner," says Witzenburg. "Here at the OCC, [sustainable practices are] just part of what we do in our standard operating procedures, so we don't necessarily have an explicit checklist of sorts. There are clients that come in who maybe have their own ideas, but in many cases the things that they come in with aren't necessarily going above and beyond anything that just comes naturally for us. [Planning a green meeting] works best when everyone is working on the same page together and customizing what needs to happen."

IT'S UP TO THE DESTINATION

Another way to make the green provider selection process easier is by choosing destinations in states with green tourism and lodging programs. Virginia Green, for example, is a comprehensive statewide program run through a partnership among the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, Virginia Tourism Corporation, and Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association.

Designed to reduce the environmental impact of the tourism industry and raise environmental awareness, the six-year-



Virginia has a state-wide program that identifies hotels, venues and attractions, including the Hampton Roads Convention Center, that meet certain sustainability requirements.



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—Tom Griffin, Virginia Green consultant

old program now has more than 1,100 participants in its suppliers network, including convention and conference centers, restaurants, hotels, suppliers and certified Virginia Green events.

Tom Griffin, Virginia Green consultant, says in order to be involved in the free program, which includes a listing in its online database and meetings guide, participants must follow a set of core requirements and be able to prove they are making strides in recycling and energy and water conservation. For example, to be a Virginia Green-certified convention or conference center, a venue must follow set guidelines for recycling, minimizing disposable food service products, water efficiency, energy conservation and have the ability to support green meetings and events.

“Picking a destination in a state with a green program makes it easier for the

planner doing a green event and saves them a lot of work,” says Griffin. “With Virginia, all you have to do is look for the green logo. Plus, you can certify your event as Virginia Green certified, which can be listed in our green events calendar.”

State green lodging programs are another resource for finding hotels that have made a commitment to conserving energy and resources. And although the number keeps growing, there are a myriad of states with green lodging programs, including California, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Maine, Missouri, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania, many of which offer certification programs. Although some critics may raise eyebrows at lodging programs that allow hotels to self-certify and audit their environmental performance to obtain and maintain certification, any environmental program is a good step in the right direction, says Scott.

“[These programs] play an important role in our work and often serve as a benchmark for our site selection process,” says Scott. “When we remember that very few programs even existed five years ago, the presence of statewide programs is a sign of the great interest and valuable outcomes programs such as these have for the economy and society.”



Until all the players and stakeholders in the green meetings industry are able to come together, follow more uniform standards and generate greater consistency across its many segments, it will be up to you to do your homework as you compare and contrast the various green programs and certifications permeating the industry. Although the APEX/ASTM Environmentally Sustainable Meeting Standards may make the navigation process a whole lot easier, until that time, make sure to arm yourself with information, ask a lot of questions and most importantly, stick to your guns about what matters to you and your organization. Whether you choose to only do business with the greenest of green or work to educate less informed providers and push them in a greener direction, remember that it is the meeting planner who has the most power to keep moving this industry forward in a more environmentally friendly and hopefully more consistent direction. ■

GREEN RESOURCES

APEX/ASTM Standards:
[conventionindustry.org/
standardspractices/APEXASTM.aspx](http://conventionindustry.org/standardspractices/APEXASTM.aspx)

LEED: usgbc.org

Green Seal: greenseal.org

Green Key Global:
greenkeyglobal.com

Energy Star: energystar.gov

Green Globe: greenglobe.com

Virginia Green:
deq.virginia.gov/p2/viriniagreen

Green Meetings Industry Council:
gmicglobal.org