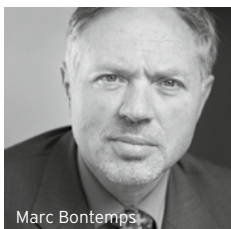


'RESPONSIBLE' EVENTS?

IT'S NO SECRET THAT MANY ORGANIZATIONS, AND INDEED BUSINESSES, ARE INCREASINGLY SWITCHING FROM FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS TO VIDEO AND INTERNET CONFERENCING. GOOD REASONS ARE TO SAVE MONEY (OF COURSE), TO SAVE TIME (IN AIRPLANES, AIRPORTS, TAXIS AND... HOTELS). OTHER GOOD REASONS ARE ECOLOGICAL: THIS SWITCH GIVES US AN OPPORTUNITY TO REDUCE OUR USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES, AND REDUCE CO₂ EMISSIONS. AND, AS MANY OR MOST OF US NOW EXPERIENCE, RESOURCE AND CO₂ REPORTING ARE INCREASINGLY EXPECTED BY MEMBERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS.

TEXT MARILYN MEHLMANN (GAP) AND MARC BONTEMPS (ECOLIFE)



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Marilyn Mehlmann

This increased interest relates partly to the spread of international standards such as ISO 14001 and EMAS, intended to reduce environmental harm. They have now been joined by a new standard, ISO 26001, intended to improve 'social responsibility'.

Nevertheless, we expect that physical meetings will continue to flourish. People need to meet people. 'Virtual' meetings

are most successful when most of the participants have already met in real life. In finding a new balance between 'virtual' and real-life meetings, the quality of the alternatives will play an important role: the quality of video and audio meetings has still to be improved, and indeed new improvements are announced almost monthly. Higher quality of physical events will be a future trend too, and a challenge for the event industry. In the light of current trends, we expect that event organizers will not only focus on further upgrading the quality outcome of their activities: there is also room for steep improvements regarding the environmental impact of our activities and the increasing need to justify our events as regards resource use and social responsibility.

This in turn puts pressure on venues. Beyond the little bathroom notices asking for saving water and towels, a broader view is emerging of 'SRE' - Socially Responsible Events. How 'green' and 'responsible' is your venue? Can it be proved? And can it be improved?

MEASURES OF 'GREEN' AND 'RESPONSIBLE'

Corporate Social Responsibility, business ethics, ISO14001, ISO26000... in and across different businesses there are industry standards. In the events industry standards are in preparation: the London Olympics will foster the new ISO20121 (for sustainability in event management). We suppose you will soon hear more and more about this standard. But also Green Key, EMAS, different Ecolabels and national incentives

will increasingly be on offer. Where to start, how to build up a step-by-step approach is an obvious question - both for venue managers, and for their clients.

A good starter is always to take a benchmark: to measure where you are. One measure of resource use and emissions, increasingly used in many sectors, is the *ecological footprint*. Different calculators are available. One can also focus on specific issues like carbon, water or material footprints. Ideally this is a measure that can be used for comparison - with other organizations, or to demonstrate improvements over time. You may already be using it in your own association, and can reasonably expect some such measurement from your venue.

WAYS TO IMPROVE

Fortunately, there is a big range of actions that can be taken by a hotel or conference/congress centre to improve performance in these areas. And a correspondingly big opportunity for an event organizer to ask pertinent questions when selecting a venue. Some things you can check in advance. Others, you will certainly notice on site. Remember to give the management feedback on your observations! Here are some major areas in which most venues could probably become more 'green':

1. Catering: a leading expert says that food is the biggest single contributor to global warming - and the sector with the biggest potential for improvements. Event venues can contribute by using locally grown food, organic and/or fair trade products, reducing waste, composting unused vegetables, by including tasty and high quality vegetarian dishes on the menu.

2. Heating/cooling, lighting and other energy use: often a first point of attention because a lot of money can be saved by investing in new applications - and by engaging staff and guests, empowering them to behave differently.

3. Printing and web hosting (did you know that internet servers account for as much CO₂ emissions, worldwide as the whole aviation sector?)

4. Office, conference, exhibition and maintenance supplies (reducing waste and useless gadgets can save money and ecological impact). Even visitors' badges can be bio-degradable these days, towel and other textiles can be fair trade...

5. Transportation: how accessible is the venue by public transport? How are car parks planned and maintained? Is your staff already 'eco-driving'?

A good starter is always to take a benchmark: to measure where you are

Some other factors that may have either a high or a low environmental impact:

- + the cleaning of the venue, laundry, and services to the guests
- + furniture, furnishings and building materials (including paint for instance)

Social responsibility also, importantly, includes 'access for all': both standards of accessibility for people with different kinds of handicap; and staff ability to cope with the needs of such guests.

'Responsible' employees are indeed a critical factor: at all levels in the venue, staff should be aware of what can be done to reduce environmental impact and act more responsibly. Education plays an equally important role as physical investments and communication. Empowering staff on these issues increases team spirit and good feeling, and creates a positive environment for guests: you'll soon notice!

Social responsibility is usually also taken to include factors that can be more difficult for you as a client or guest to assess. It includes things like equal opportunity for employees - regardless of race, gender, age, etc.; working with the entire supply chain to meet high ethical and environmental standards; contributing to the local community.

TOP MANAGEMENT: THE KEY

The values, priorities, and behaviour of the top management team are the key to success. This is as true now as when W. Edwards Deming pointed it out in the 1940s, and as true in the events sector as anywhere else.

A team that truly values 'green' and 'responsible' performance is not just 'green-washing'. It's committed to improvements and constantly looking for better ways to do things.

A team that prioritizes improved performance constantly communicates this to all employees, clients, and other stakeholders; and invites evaluation by including 'green' and 'responsible' factors in, for instance, the annual report. The top management team communicates most effectively by example. Do it! Expect to be noticed.

And, most of all: guests will love to come to a place where things that matter really count.

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