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From My Perspective

Fad or here to stay? Time will tell for green meetings

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Summer is knocking at our door and at present, it is unclear what effect increases in gas prices will have on summer travel plans.

And just like rising gas prices, there are some things out of our control that affect the meetings industry, but there are also trends that we can embrace that can make a positive effect for years to come.

There is a trend toward creating greener business environments. We are seeing this reflected in the travel and meetings industry.

Words like global warming often ignite a passion, but many times we are left wondering what practical steps we can take to do our part in a realistic nature to make a difference in our daily lives.

In 2002, the Convention Industry Council created a Green Meetings Task Force to create a minimum of best practices for meeting and event organizers and suppliers to use as guidelines for implementing policies of sustainability.

This group set to provide realistic standards to make this process more readily adoptable on both the meeting planner and supplier sides of the industry.

According to the Green Meetings Industry Council, a 2003 survey by the Travel Industry Association of America indicated 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.

There are many hotels, convention centers and event venues that have implemented a greener way of doing business by offering alternatives for their clients and educating their employees so they can incorporate these principles in their personal lives.

A recent study by BlueGreen Meetings found that Fairmont Hotel and Resorts offers environmentally friendly conference service at several properties.

What is a green meeting?

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Fairmont's program includes four key elements:

- Eco-service, waste-free food and beverage services, 100 percent recycled note pads, biodegradable pens and containers for recycling in meeting rooms. Leftover food is donated to food banks.
- Eco-accommodation, in-room information, recycling bins, optional linen replacement, energy-efficient lighting, biodegradable soap, recyclable amenities, water-saving showerheads and taps.
- Eco-cuisine, menus that include local, seasonal and organically grown foods.
- Eco-programming, offering environmentally responsible activities and speakers.

Be sure to ask during your next site visit what green initiatives the hotel or event venue has implemented to determine what steps need to be taken if it is important to your organization.

Here are 10 tips from BlueGreen Meetings to make your meeting eco-friendly.

1. Put it in writing. Establish an environmental statement or policy for the meeting and get buy-in for it from the meeting host organization's management. Share the policy with suppliers, delegates and speakers.
2. Use paperless technology. Use electronic technology to cut paper use. Create a Web site, offer electronic registration and advertise using the Web and/or e-mail.
3. Meet close. Reduce distances traveled by speakers and delegates. Choose a city that's close to as many delegates as possible. Within the city, choose a venue and hotel that are close to the airport and each other.
4. Practice the 3Rs. Ask your venue to provide visible and accessible reduction, reuse and recycling services.
5. Bulk up. Have your food and beverage service provider use bulk dispensers for sugar, salt, pepper and other condiments.
6. Lighten your stay. Choose a hotel that offers a linen reuse program and bulk dispensers for shampoos and soaps in suites.
7. Eat green. Include vegetarian meals and have meals using local, seasonal produce.
8. Close the recycling loop. Have all printed materials published on recycled paper, using vegetable-based inks and on both sides of the page.
9. Save energy. Coordinate with the meeting venue to ensure that energy lights and air conditioning will be turned off when rooms are not in use.
10. Spread the word. Tell delegates, speakers and the media about your success. You'll be surprised - efforts to be more green are often contagious.

Dallas Teague Snider is a national account director and recruiting manager for ConferenceDirect. You can reach her at (205) 967-5536.