

How to Add Value to Meeting Planners by Helping Them Green Their Events

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Everybody wants to go green and be green these days, yet so many meetings are set up in very environmentally destructive ways. It's not that the meeting planners have any evil intent. It's just that most people don't know how many easy, inexpensive (and in many cases, cost-saving) things they can do to slash the carbon footprint and waste of an event.

Especially if you're booked far enough ahead to have some input into the venue, you can help meeting planners build a reputation as an earth-friendly, and provide great material for their annual social and environmental responsibility reports. You give them the information they need to work effectively with venues, and they look like heroes to their green-oriented members. And if they adopt these innovations for future events, you had a huge cumulative positive impact.

Change the Drinking Patterns: Both hot and cold beverages are easy places to reduce the environmental impact of a large gathering. Ask the meeting planner to request reusable ceramic cups, organic and Fair Trade coffee and tea, and most of all, pitchers of filtered tap water and reusable glass or plastic glasses instead of water bottles (skip this if you're speaking in a place where the regular water isn't safe to drink).

Bottled water is an environmental disaster! It consumes petroleum and wastes or contaminates several times as much water as goes in the bottle. Also, bottling plants can draw down the local water supply, causing problems for agriculture and for local residents. Plus, the carbon footprint of transporting the water around the world is significant, and then there's the leftover bottle at the end; most of them don't get recycled and end up in a landfill for hundreds of years—or worse, releasing toxic chemicals when burned in an incinerator.

As for the hot drinks...organic is your assurance that no harmful chemicals have contaminated the beverage, resulting in a healthier (and usually tastier) drink for the attendees. Fair Trade certification is your guarantee that the harvesters and processors were paid a living wage, that money stays in the community, and that child slavery was not involved (a particularly sensitive issue for cocoa).

Encourage Transportation-Sharing and Public Transit: It's pretty easy for meeting planners to set up a web page matching people needing and offering rides. A car consumes almost as much fuel with one person onboard as it does with four—and time, traffic, parking, etc. don't

change. Thus, if a driver gets three riders, the environmental impact and total cost are reduced by nearly 75 percent. On longer rides of a few hours, ridesharing also reduces stress on attenders by letting the driving be shared—and offers some quality networking time, to boot. Added bonus: if the routes involve carpool lanes or reduced tolls for high-occupancy vehicles, sharing rides may actually save time and money.

If people are flying in for the event, coordinating airport pickups to maximize vehicle occupancy is another green option (and saves on airport parking, too). Or let people share rented cars.

Don't forget, meeting planners can encourage the greenest option: public transportation. More and more airports offer easy rail or bus connections to downtown. And attenders choosing this option can kiss all the hassles goodbye (parking, navigation, gas stations....).

Encourage other speakers to factor in total travel time when evaluating options. In densely populated areas like the Northeast United States or much of Europe, by the time you add up arriving at the airport 2-3 hours ahead, the greater distance from home, the long ride from the destination airport downtown, the airport parking issue, etc., total travel time by plane is often shorter or not much longer than flying. Plus, you'll have more legroom, more room to work, free wi-fi and power outlets, and the ability to walk around any time you want. You'll arrive refreshed and ready to go.

Choose a Green Venue: If your meeting planner can host the event at an eco-resort, that's terrific. But even among traditional hotels and conference centers, some are greener than others. Suggest that your planner include green features in the venue evaluation criteria, such as:

- Solar, wind, and geothermal for water heating and/or electricity
- Water-saving faucets and showerheads
- Windows that open
- Key-activated in-room electricity (that shuts off when the room is empty)
- Superinsulation
- Lots of oxygen-releasing plants in the atrium
- Locally-sourced organic food
- Natural (rather than chemical) pest control
- Earth-friendly landscaping with walking trails

- Full-spectrum LED or compact fluorescent lighting
- Natural sun

Attendees will actually feel better at a venue like that, too; fresh air and natural light create a sense of well-being.

Control the Temperature: Overheating or overcooling a conference room makes people uncomfortable and wastes a lot of energy. In summer, suggest that dress be casual and let people wear short sleeves at 72 degrees, instead of jackets at 65 or 68. In winter, sweaters can bring up the comfort level without burning oil or coal. Suggest to meeting planners that they work with facilities managers to only heat or cool rooms that are being or about to be used, to use fans and skylights to ease the burden on overtaxed HVAC systems, and to provide enough air flow to make a wider range of temperatures comfortable.

Offer Green Menu Choices: Meeting planners can order organic and local food choices (including decent options for vegetarians and vegans, who by definition are eating much more lightly on the earth)...replace sodas and junk foods with healthy snacks like fruits, nuts, vegetable sticks, and whole-grain crackers...

Schedule Some Outdoor Activities: Even half an hour of outside time a day in the middle of a conference may prove to be one of the most positive memories for attendees. If you can convince meeting planners to build in at least one outdoor activity a day—a tour of local sites, a walk around the grounds, a few rounds of team-building non-competitive New Games, a power council, even a Frisbee match—your audience will already be in a good mood when you hit the platform.

Reduce Paper: Ask the meeting planner about converting all the handouts to PDFs online—or at least printing on both sides of the page. See if you can get a commitment to use recycled paper. Much of the advance publicity can be electronic, too. Once again, this reduces costs for the organizer, and not only saves paper but also reduces the need for eco-unfriendly color printing.

Recycle: Encourage the meeting planner to work with the venue to recapture and recycle as many materials as possible: glass, paper, food waste, plastic, and metal. Point out the bragging rights of having a zero-waste event, and make it a challenge to attendees, with points and prizes.

Put Green on the Agenda: If the event theme lends itself to it, encourage the organizer to incorporate green speakers into the platform, green messages in the program (including all the steps they're taking to reduce the footprint of the conference, and everything else the

organization is doing beyond the conference—as well as things the attenders can do to reduce their own impact at the conference and when they get home), green side trips such as a local organic farm or recycling center, green accountability buddies to help attenders go more eco-friendly in their own business...there's no limit to what you can suggest. Oh yes, and suggest some green sponsors who could donate appropriate items for the attender swag bags.

Go Virtual: Show meeting planners how they can expand their reach by letting people attend online from anywhere in the world. They collect more registration fees while slashing their costs, you reach a potentially bigger audience, and you get that Nirvana-like "non-airplane income." And you entirely eliminate the negative environmental consequences of flying a large group of people in from all corners of the world. This is not right for every event, but it does work well for many kinds of events, and it's much less taxing on the speakers, meeting planners, and attenders.

Of course, this has some negative sides: the wonderful serendipity that can happen face-to-face is a lot harder to achieve, "seeing" friends online is not the same as giving them a hug in person, and attenders may find it more difficult to carve out a whole day's worth of online events under the pressures of everyday life—but in the right circumstances, it's worth considering. For instance, if a meeting planner is thinking of an international sales conference to introduce a new tech product line, the quality of training may actually be better online, attenders can take the sessions at their own convenience, time zones no longer matter, and the whole team around the world can get up to speed quickly and then get back to work immediately.

Once your meeting planners see how going green makes them heroes in the organization, they'll be in your fan club for raising their stature. And you can take satisfaction in knowing you "rolled back the carbon clock" of this and future events.

Speaker, marketing consultant, and copywriter Shel Horowitz helps businesses find the sweet spot where profitability intersects with social justice and environmental healing: how to create and market products and services that make a direct difference on issues like hunger, poverty, war, and catastrophic climate change. With 40+ years in both marketing and activism, he helps you reach green, socially conscious Cultural Creative consumers with one set of marketing messages—and reach skeptics with a different set of messages—both 100% accurate. He is the primary author (with Jay Conrad Levinson) of the award-winning Guerrilla Marketing to Heal the World (Shel's 10th book, published by Morgan James).