

Green meetings: Does anyone really care?



By Barbara Maple

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Every time you pick up a copy of a trade magazine these days, it seems there's another article about "green" or "sustainable" meetings – the new terms for meetings, conventions and exhibitions that are carried out with an eye to environmental conservation and the newer, even broader concept of "sustainability".

Yet in spite of all the attention this area is generating, there is as yet little real evidence that this is a major factor in the minds of clients as they weigh all the other factors that go into their decision process.

What is driving this new issue in our industry? And is it a real factor in our future or simply a sidebar to the ways in which the industry is developing? Sustainability – the ways in which an industry secures its long-term future through managing its impacts and interactions with the surrounding community – is still evolving and encompassing everything from energy and environmental issues to questions of social responsibility.

The idea is that by being "sustainable" we can ensure the future not only of the environment but of the economy itself. It is a growing issue for many different sectors but a particularly big one for convention centres because we are such a large and obvious presence wherever we operate. However it may appear to us now, sustainability will likely be a growing issue for some time to come and there will be several driving forces behind this growth.

The first is that our communities will increasingly expect it of us. We and our activities are highly visible wherever we operate and attract a lot of attention from the local community. This means people expect that we will take a leadership role in implementing more programmes where the good of

the community is at stake. At the same time, we are often government-owned and operated, which means we are under pressure to set an example in this regard. So as community expectations increase in this area, we will likely be amongst the first to respond.

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The second reason is that our clients will increasingly want it because their own members will want it. Environmental concern has gone from being a "cause" to simply an expectation. People today just assume that environmental concerns are being addressed because they have become a fact of life in most parts of the world.

For this reason, the people who make up the membership of the organisations whose events we host will be applying more pressure on organisers to address the role environmental and sustainability considerations can play in their events. This, in turn, will make sustainability issues and the record of a centre in this regard more of a decision factor for meeting planners.

The third reason sustainability will become a bigger factor is that it will contribute to cost-effective operations, particularly in key areas like energy. One of the big points of the sustainability concept is that industries must manage long-term costs if they are to be successful in an ongoing way and the costs of energy and waste management are amongst the

largest and least predictable we face as facility managers. Like so many other aspects of environmental and waste management – container deposits, for example – it is often only when there are significant cost implications that action gets taken.

Finally, this whole area will increasingly become a matter of law, as communities and governments in many parts of the world strengthen their regulations around how businesses manage their environmental and social impacts. Just as issues like smoking have moved from the encouragement stage to outright prohibition, so we can expect that what are today seen as being good practices will likely become legal requirements as community expectations evolve.

The results of all these affect many different areas of facility management – everything from building operations and environmental control measures to how new facilities are designed and constructed, and even how we market and sell our facilities.

We will, for example, likely have to get more involved with our clients to make sure that they comply with community sustainability expectations when they hold their events in our cities. This is now simply a "good thing to do" but will increasingly be a requirement for being allowed to operate at all. So there are a lot of reasons to expect that you will be hearing even more about sustainability and "green" events in the future.

For convention centres, the key will be in anticipating and planning for this eventuality, even if the demand takes a while to develop. By planning ahead, we will be ready for what will eventually become a necessity. And in the meantime, those who move forward may even be able to get a market advantage! Events