



Environmental Quality: Is it Really a Meetings Issue?

Over the last couple of decades, environmental concern has moved from the fringes of public interest to become a central part of community expectations. Any activity that involves major development or operations, with their attendant use of resources and production of waste is a candidate for public scrutiny – and meetings and conventions, by definition, are high on any such list.

In comparison with other forms of commercial activity, meetings and conventions are relatively benign. They do not generate toxic wastes, or consume vast quantities of non-renewable resources and are most often comprised of people who appreciate the opportunity to explore and interact with new and attractive surroundings – not exactly the classic image of environmental despoilers. But at the same time, they are based on large assemblies of people – and that makes them potentially significant users of energy and generators of waste. As a result, they are a legitimate target for those who believe we should be demonstrating a greater sense of responsibility in how we deal with environmental issues.

We don't hear as much public outcry as we used to on such issues – but that's not because people are less interested in environmental quality. It's a reflection of the fact that while in the past good environmental practices had to be demanded, now they are simply presumed. In most parts of the world, environmental protection is enshrined in regulations, building codes and community expectations – so they have become more of a fact of life. But this doesn't mean complacency, as we quickly find out when an environmental issue attracts public attention.

AIPPC – the International Association of Convention Centres – believes that environmental issues are important to convention and exhibition facilities for a number of reasons. Amongst these are;

- The community demands it: Convention centres are typically high profile operators in their respective communities, and little of what goes on there is hidden from public attention. That means that a centre must be able to demonstrate good environmental practices in a visible way, and put itself above any criticism that might otherwise damage community relations.
- Clients want it: Many associations and other client organizations have their own environmental standards, and select facilities at least partly on the basis of their ability to meet these. Even those who do not formalize their expectations expect a certain level of compliance, and this is readily seen in the exception; while they may not demand the highest standards, they will most certainly be concerned about a *lack* of such standards.
- It demonstrates leadership: As community facilities, convention centres are often expected to demonstrate leadership in key areas, and that includes environmental protection. Many centres are owned and operated by some level of government, which puts them under even more pressure to set an example. In either case, they are amongst the last places that can ignore environmental regulations

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- It's a good investment strategy: Many facilities quite rightly promote the “environmental friendliness” of the industry as a way of bolstering the community support needed to generate capital funding and ongoing support for operations. However, this claim that can only be upheld if centres set an example in their own operations. An investment in good environmental practices may thus prove to be one of the best business tactics a centre can engage in.
- It can save you money: For many facilities, this is the best argument of all; energy use and waste management are typically two of the more significant cost areas for convention centres, and by becoming more efficient in these areas, there are significant cost savings to be achieved. Add to this the improved relations with client and community groups and you have a compelling argument for doing something.

For all these reasons, AIPIC believes that there are good business reasons for investing in the development of an environmental strategy, and has for some years maintained a “template” for the use of its members in developing their own environmental standards and practices. This is in the process of being updated – and when completed, it will reflect new developments in environmental thinking taking place around the world.

The bottom line: environmental quality is on the agenda in the meetings business – and a reasoned response is both needed and potentially a real benefit to convention centres.

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