

MINNESOTA GETS ROLLING ON PLANNING SUSTAINABLE MEETINGS

thinking green

BY CHUCK GROTHAUS

It may not be quite like riding a bike, but everyone's learning how to do it. Meeting and event planners worldwide are peddling fast to build eco-friendly strategies into events and meetings. From the planners who pull off the annual Academy Awards gala to those coordinating the coming Summer and Winter Olympics in Beijing and Vancouver respectively, meetings and events are getting green. Recycling, reducing, reusing, renewing and neutralizing carbon footprints aren't just the trendy things to do. Planners are smack in the middle of planning green events—often at the request of their clients.

Green conventions, meetings or events are designed to minimize the burden on the environment that large-scale activities often create. Green event planners recommend, create and execute practices designed to reduce waste, lower the demand on resources and energy use, streamline travel and local transportation needs, and provide food that not only appeals to the palates of attendees but that contribute to a sustainable local economic environment as well.

“Clients love it when you tell them that their event is having a positive impact on the environment. That kind of publicity is good for everyone.”

— LAURA SALYARDS-FRYBERGER,
OWNER, FLINGS EVENT DESIGN

“It's important because of the impact our choices have on the environment,” says Susan Davis, catering director at Cue at The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. “We all have a social responsibility to the communities we do

business in, and conducting green events plays a critical role in that contribution.”

When thinking about green meetings, Davis believes the question now is “why not?” versus the “why?” of yesteryear. “Simple green practices decrease global warming, air pollution, water pollution, traffic congestion and the need for oil. For example, when sourcing food for Guthrie events, we focus on buying locally and doing business in the community where we are based. With this in mind, we reduce the number of ‘food miles’ it takes to get food from harvest to the banquet table,” she says. “This tactic alone results in fresher, better-tasting food, lower transportation costs and a reduction of carbon emissions created when transporting food to our facility.”

Local Support

Green meetings in Minnesota may not be on par with green meetings in cities like San Francisco and Portland, but thanks to suppliers, convention facilities and interest among planners to make a difference in the environment, our state isn't that far behind either.

“Minnesota is one of the top states for being environmentally friendly,” says Jeff Stuhr, information officer and event manager with the State of Minnesota, and head of Minnesota's Living Green Expo, held each May at the State Fairgrounds in St. Paul. “New suppliers and vendors go into business regularly around the state and the ideas and products or services now available are very helpful to meeting and event planners.”

Many Minnesota companies are at the forefront of their industries, offering organic products and locally grown foods and beverages that contribute to the sustainable economy in the state as well as to the environment.

Since 1997, Peace Coffee (www.peacecoffee.com) has been selling organically grown, fair trade coffee beans to Minnesota businesses and caterers. In addition, Peace Coffee uses pedal power to deliver its products whenever possible to further reduce the environmental impact it has on transportation costs.

Minnesota-based Banner Creations (www.bannercreations.com) offers products that are made from recycled and reused resources. For example, the firm uses water-based inks and recycles the paper used in its printing process, whereas most banner and flag printing is done with solvent inks on vinyl. Over-runs and scrap fabric are donated to non-profits, organizations and schools.

Chow Girls Catering (www.chowgirls.net), based in Minneapolis, offers catering services for a variety of small, medium and large events with an environmentally friendly focus. The

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menus created by owners Amy Lynn Brown and Heidi Andermack are designed to incorporate local, organic and seasonal ingredients resulting in naturally good foods.

Finding Green Facilities

Finding facilities for a meeting or event that will not only work with your efforts, but also operate in an eco-friendly fashion will become easier over time. Many hotels and convention facilities are "going green" as clients make it a requirement before booking space for their function.

"Planners should be taking the lead role with each vendor they rely on," says Laura Salyards-Fryberger, owner and event designer at Flings Event Design in Minneapolis. "If you ask the facility managers what they do to reuse, reduce and recycle, you might be surprised at their efforts. In most cases

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AT THE GUTHRIE THEATER

they're more than willing to set up programs for your event because it makes them look good as well as you. Clients love it when you tell them that their event is having a positive impact on the environment. That kind of publicity is good for everyone."

One example of a facility making efforts to go green is the Minneapolis Convention Center. MCC has been cleaning green for more than three years. Convention facility supervisor Randy Rasmussen made the switch to cleaning products that are good for the environment and cleaning staff as well—with blends of chemicals that are non-toxic but still get the job done. In

addition, the convention center supports numerous environmental programs, including: monitoring HVAC and lighting systems around the clock to save energy; sending food waste to a local hog farm for use as animal feed; providing more than four dozen paper, can and bottle recyclable material collection receptacles for event attendees; and training staff on what materials can be recycled and why it's important.

"Many hotel chains and meeting facilities are growing the list of sustainable and environmentally friendly services they provide," says Diane Pearson, owner of Event BizNiz and certified meeting planner. "This concept is just reaching the ears and minds who sit in the board rooms at corporations in Minnesota. It's our job as planners to raise the profile of the impact green meetings and events have on our state and on the environment."

Membership associations are also finding ways to integrate eco-friendly thinking into their events.

"Incorporating a recognition aspect into any event is a great way to both spread green ideas to other businesses and give well-deserved PR to companies that are doing the right thing," says Kate Rubin, president of the Minnesota High Tech Assoc. "At our annual awards celebration this year, we will launch a new green category to recognize member organizations that practice environmental responsibility and incorporate sustainability principles into their business model. It's generating a great deal of positive buzz among our members and the broader technology community."

According to Pearson, "Once green concepts receive proper awareness, planners can better measure the ROI of events with metrics that include the positive impact a conference or meeting has on the community from a sustainability and eco-friendliness standpoint. If we learn all we can and put this new knowledge into practice, our role as planners will be viewed even more positively in the board room and beyond."

Feeling good about the events you plan while making the client look great in the process is a major achievement when creating green meetings. "By recommending and promoting green, eco-friendly tactics as the foundation to every event we will play a major role in contributing to a better city, state and world," says Salyards-Fryberger. "Plus, corporate clients get excited when they know they can promote the fact that their latest event was 'carbon neutral' or resulted in minimal waste. It's a win-win for everyone involved." ☺

5 Use pitchers of fresh ice water instead of bottles of water.

ONE
Ask meeting facility managers what they do to reuse, recycle and reduce.

2 Use china and glass for food service instead of disposable items.

THREE USE RECYCLED PAPER FOR INVITATIONS, POSTERS AND PAPER SUPPLIES.

four

Work with the recycling center to plan for optimal recycling. Discuss where recyclables can be collected, stored and picked up, and who is responsible for signs and collection (*make it easy for event attendees*).

Ten Things you can do to go green ~ now

SIX Use bio-compostable plates and utensils.

Seven
Identify and use local and organic food and beverage suppliers.

8 PICK MEETING LOCATIONS LOCATED ON MASS TRANSIT ROUTES AND PUBLICIZE AND ENCOURAGE THE USE OF MASS TRANSPORTATION TO ATTEND THE FUNCTION.

Nine ~ Source products that are: reusable (*name tags, binders, grease boards*); are made from recycled content; use little or no packaging or packaging that contains recycled or reused materials; and are recyclable or compostable on site or in community programs.

10 DONATE FOOD LEFTOVERS TO FOOD RESCUE PROGRAMS IN THE COMMUNITY.