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MEETINGS

LUXURY VENUES FOR GROUP EVENTS | 2020 EDITION

CHANGING WITH THE TIMES

A Journey Through the Event of the Future
Fresh Ideas, Cool Tools, and Stunning Venues

PLUS: Get Smart About Sustainable Meetings

Fontainebleau Miami Beach
Miami Beach, Florida

Even when it's impossible to eliminate disposable tableware and utensils entirely, planners can opt for eco-friendly versions that are recycled or compostable.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK



Planning for the PLANET

Consider these smart strategies
for sustainable meetings

BY KATE DOYLE HOOPER



Sustainability. Everyone is talking about it, but what are planners doing about it? What can they do to make their events greener, more sustainable, and less wasteful? Despite the buzz, until recently, the shift to sustainable meetings has progressed at a turgid pace. Adoption has been slowed by concerns about inconvenience, additional cost, and — let's be honest — inertia and a general resistance to change.

But today, with the fate of the earth hanging in the balance, there is a new sense of urgency. The key players, including clients, venues, suppliers, and even attendees, are fast-tracking sustainability, putting it at the top of the must-do-now list. For planners with either a corporate or personal mission to go green, the good news is that much of the power — and responsibility — to make those initiatives successful is in their hands.

In fact, every nook and cranny of an event or meeting, be it a corporate retreat for 50 executives or an industry-wide conference for 5,000, represents an opportunity to do better and be greener and more sustainable. The challenge is knowing how to implement those changes with minimal disruption to the attendees and negligible impact on the bottom line.



Encourage attendees who must fly to book with eco-conscious companies such as Alaska Airlines, which launched its #FillBeforeYouFly initiative in 2019, asking guests to bring an empty, reusable bottle to fill at a water station before boarding.

Coming Clean About Going Green

What's driving the need for cleaner, greener events? "People the world over are waking up to the fact that the earth's resources are running out," says Carina Bauer, CEO of IMEX Group. "Be it clean air, clean water, or uncontaminated food, we're finally realizing that we need to change our ways — and that applies to business practices, too." Factor in the younger generations' passion for more sustainable life and work choices, and the meetings industry is facing a sea change.

Another key driver: Bauer believes the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a big motivator, providing a clear path to a greener, more sustainable, and more inclusive future. "But at IMEX," she says, "we keep hearing from planners the world over, and especially in North America, that suppliers don't offer up environmentally friendly substitutes, be it food options, products, signage, or power supplies. Equally, suppliers tell us that planners don't ask for them." So it's something of a chicken and egg situation. "What we know for sure is that event organizers and producers have huge power, much more than they realize. As a planner, you have to keep asking, keep pushing back, keep advocating for greener alternatives."

The sustainability push should begin as the list of potential venues is developed. Planners shouldn't hesitate to get granular with each venue about exactly which sustainable practices are (or aren't) in place and which certifications they have or are in the process of earning. In this new woke reality, the top contenders' position on the sustainability scale will likely carry more weight than it would have a few years ago, so planners should negotiate pricing for the sustainable practices they feel strongest about before the contract is signed.

Up in the Air

One of the key environmental issues with events does its damage before the first session even starts: travel. Depending on the venue destination, a significant number of attendees will likely take a plane to get there, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions as they go. To shrink the event's carbon footprint, encourage attendees to take trains or buses instead of planes, particularly for shorter hops, such as Philadelphia to Boston or New York to Washington, D.C. Add further encouragement in the form of special discounts, incentives, or cash back rewards for those who go the lower-emissions route. And

remind attendees to carpool, ride-share, or take public transportation for trips to and from the train or bus station and the airport, further shrinking the carbon footprint for each leg of the journey. Planners can also urge those attendees who must fly to book environmentally kinder economy seats on direct, nonstop, daytime flights, all of which will translate to lower emissions and fuel savings. Also consider promoting eco-conscious airlines such as Air France, Air New Zealand, Alaska Airlines, Cathay Pacific, Finnair, JetBlue, KLM, Qantas, and Qatar Airways.

Another way to help reduce the impact of all those flights is by purchasing carbon offsets, which help balance the pollution scales by investing in projects dedicated to cutting carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions. Ryan Harvey, sustainability manager at the Oregon Convention Center, points out that offsets should be part of the green equation, but they're not the total solution. "We know that all kinds of behaviors need to change if we're to reach the greenhouse gas reduction targets necessary to address climate change," he says. "But I like that carbon offsets are being talked about more, since they raise awareness about our current travel emissions crisis."

Fortunately, offsets are becoming easier to buy. Some airlines have begun offering them for purchase at the time of booking, and others will be compelled to buy offsets in 2020 to comply with the U.N.'s new Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA). To get them, either for themselves or a larger crowd, travelers can start with the U.N.'s International Civil Aviation Organization Carbon Emissions Calculator to calculate the appropriate offset size. Then, take a look at companies such as GoldStandard.org or newcomer Jet-Set Offset, which offer donation-based alternatives to the traditional carbon-offset marketplace. They connect eco-conscious travelers with environmental nonprofit organizations that operate certified carbon-offset projects, as well as advocacy, education, renewable energy, reforestation, and/or conservation programs. Or, Harvey suggests, "try companies like TerraPass or our local Bonneville Environmental Foundation, who make it very easy to purchase offsets for travel."

What if intentions are good but the budget is tight? Not to worry, Harvey says: A truly creative planner can turn the carbon-offset line item into an excellent, reasonably priced sponsorship opportunity that benefits the planet. Another bonus: Carbon-offset purchases may also be tax deductible, so have the accounting department review the plan as well.



Water-filling stations, reusable dishes, and fair trade, organic products such as coffee and tea are easy ways to make meetings more sustainable.

Food for Thought

Once all those attendees have found their way to the event, they'll be expecting days punctuated by coffee breaks, meals, and perhaps a reception to top it off. Even with the help of technology, getting the numbers right is an imperfect science, usually fueled by the very real fear of running out. Between over-ordering and oversets, it's easy for even the most seasoned pro to wind up with too much food at the end of the day. Until recently, food waste was considered a cost of doing business. That mentality, too, has undergone a major shift. Now it's about minimizing excess, sourcing food more thoughtfully, ordering more conservatively, and managing food waste in a way that, ideally, doesn't involve the landfill.

To achieve this, planners and their food vendors, be it an outside caterer or onsite venue staff, need to review menus from every angle to arrive at an agreeable level of sustainability and earth-conscious sourcing. The first step to greening up

meeting menus is to make sure local and seasonal ingredients are the default, whether they're grown by local farmers or venue chefs with onsite herb and vegetable gardens. If these ingredients cost a little more, then order a little less, abiding by the mantra of "quality over quantity." For non-local products, such as coffee, tea, and chocolate, fair trade is the way to go, and if they're non-GMO and/or organic, so much the better.

When there is extra food at the end of service, despite everyone's best efforts, what's the environmentally responsible thing to do with it all? Whenever possible, most venues and caterers partner with local food rescue operations.

"We absolutely never purposefully oversell food to our clients, but leftover food is inevitable from time to time, so we always do the right thing by making sure the food is recycled," says Emelie Corcoran, chief administrative officer for Corcoran Caterers in Silver Spring, Maryland. "We work regularly with Nourish Now, a nonprofit food bank. They come to our facility, pick up excess, and distribute the food



Even the types of food served at an event can affect its environmental impact. For instance, the production of lamb and beef creates far more greenhouse gas emissions than poultry or vegetables.

to families in need throughout the D.C. metro area.”

Since food safety and proper food handling are paramount, Corcoran says, “most organizations will require food to be untouched, as in, still in the pans/platters they were originally sent in, or in their original containers.” For leftover amounts that aren’t large enough to rescue, it’s fairly common for chefs to “recycle” excess for daily staff meals, so good food will not go to the landfill. For food scraps that cannot be recycled, hospitality outlets are starting to invest more heavily in composting and industrial-grade “biodigesters,” which, with the help of bacteria, break down organic materials to produce renewable energy and materials that are often used for fertilizer.

Today’s Specials Are ...

The next level of greening up any catering order involves weighing the ecological pros and cons of certain types of foods on the menu. According to the Environmental Working

Group’s Meat Eater’s Guide to Climate Change and Health — which charts the total greenhouse gas emissions in the life cycles of common food items — lamb and beef are at the top of the emissions list. Pound for pound, they both require significantly more resources to raise and feed, and they also generate more methane (a greenhouse gas) and manure than pork, salmon, or chicken.

So what does all this look like on the plate? A lot less animal protein, a lot more vegetables, and going easy on the cheese, whose production creates the third-most emissions, behind lamb and beef. By building in a lower-carbon meatless meal or meatless day, planners can conserve resources and keep budgets in check. And don’t forget the ol’ sleight of hand: switching to smaller plates. A recent Danish study showed that when plate sizes are reduced by as little as 9%, food waste drops by more than 25%, so think small to save big.

In addition to emissions from production and transport, some foods use a lot of certain limited resources, such as water.



While food safety regulations make it difficult to donate the leftover food on the buffet, there are many organizations that collect full, unopened trays that never made it out of the kitchen.

Serve fewer foods that require especially large amounts of water to produce, including rice, wheat, and soy beans — particularly in destinations experiencing severe water shortages and droughts.

Planners can also score big water savings by turning afternoon coffee breaks into tea breaks. According to the Water Footprint Network, one cup of coffee takes about 70 gallons of water to produce, while the same size cup of tea takes just 7 gallons. Says Michele Zontine, CEO of MEZcreative, an event design and production company in San Francisco: “In the end, unsweetened tea and infused waters are also better for the planet and health of your attendees, so swap out old-school sodas and all the cans, plastic bottles, and waste that go along with them.”

Grasping at Straws

Beyond the food, certain materials are getting much more scrutiny now than ever before. As the world wakes up to the

horrendous toll plastic is taking on our oceans, planet, wildlife, and physical well-being, anything made with it has lost considerable appeal. That’s especially true when it comes to non-essential items such as straws and cocktail and coffee stirrers.

Many hotel and restaurant chains have stopped offering or vowed to eliminate plastic straws, and any planner with a green meetings mission should do the same. However, old habits die hard, and some attendees still like to sip through straws. That’s why planners are taking advantage of the new plastic-free straw industry that’s emerged seemingly overnight.

Among the eco-friendly offerings are the biodegradable — and technically edible — pasta straws called Stroodles. There’s also the classic, slow-to-degrade paper straw, but some are better than others. For instance, Aardvark Straws are made from renewable sources and are biodegradable, decomposing in just 30 to 60 days. There are even straws made out of straw, such as the non-GMO Harvest Straws, as well as organic grass

straws and avocado seed straws. The latest entry into the green straw market comes from tequila juggernaut Jose Cuervo, which has unveiled fully biodegradable, sustainable drinking straws made from upcycled agave fibers — the remnants of the plant used to make tequila — that are rolling out this year.

Marina McCoy, founder of Waste Free Earth, a sustainability consulting company that specializes in event waste reduction, diversion, and management, likes drinking straws made of sustainable bamboo. “It grows extremely fast,” she says. “But lately, we’ve been getting into hay straws, because they are more local and are making use of something — hay — that tends to be composted.” However, she encourages all event clients to go straw-free whenever possible. “Compostable straws are still waste at the end of the day, and our goal is to reduce all forms of waste — compostable, recyclable, and landfill items.”

While purging events of plastic, planners can’t forget three more big sources of landfill-stuffing event waste: bottled water, plastic or paper cups (most of which are lined in a thin layer of nonbiodegradable plastic), and plastic name badges. Swap out individual plastic bottles for water dispensers and pitchers with compostable cups or glassware. For parched panelists and speakers, have earth-friendlier boxed waters on hand instead of plastic bottles.

On those occasions where disposables or single-use items are unavoidable, keep quantities small and insist on compostable serviceware that’s designed to degrade quickly. If nothing else, purchase sustainably made items from eco-conscious companies such as Tossware, which specializes in high-style plastic glassware made from recycled water bottles.

As for those thousands of name badges encased in plastic, keep more out of the landfill by providing bins at all event exits to collect them to reuse next year. Better yet, skip plastic altogether and switch to badges made from unlaminated, recyclable cardboard or plantable, floral-seeded paper to really drive home the eco-message.

In addition to plastic straw alternatives such as paper and bamboo, there are now pasta straws called Stroodles, which don’t affect the flavor of the drink and biodegrade within a day.



Signage of the Times

Another environmentally questionable but necessary aspect of events is signage. Thankfully, the rise of digital signage has been a godsend for planners, saving trees, time, and production dollars, not to mention making last-minute updates a breeze. The trouble is, not every venue has digital signage (or enough of it) yet, so planners, as green as they want to be, may still find themselves producing paper versions of at least some signs.



Digital signage and interactive boards help cut down on the number of printed signs that are needed. Another eco-friendly way to distribute maps and information is via a mobile event app.

When that's the case, the first order of business is to find out what the venue can and will recycle, as capabilities and local regulations are extremely variable. After establishing the recycling ground rules, have materials produced locally to minimize the environmental impact of transporting them. Save even more resources by putting the entire event catalog and agenda online to eliminate or at least drastically cut the print run. Then, promote this big green change via pre-event social posts and email blasts to get attendees on board and prep them before arrival. Planners can also commission signage that's plastic-free, made of recyclable paper or cardboard, and printed with nontoxic inks.

For signs that aren't easily recycled, see how they can be reused. "My team and I always prearrange to donate signage and other event décor items to local schools so they can reuse our materials," Zontine says. "And we print only on one side so schools can more easily use the other side."

She also recommends keeping printed materials to an absolute minimum and letting tablet stands and mobile event apps do the heavy informational lifting for attendees onsite. She encourages clients and exhibitors to present their stories on tablets or laptops and distribute traditional collateral —

which is often left behind — on reusable, recycled flash drives instead.

To minimize the number of business cards that attendees need to bring, Ariel M. Weinshanker, founder of Vosant Meetings and Travel, encourages attendees to use a paper-free, app-based solution called CamCard, which enables them to scan one another's QR codes to swap contact information, then export it online as a Microsoft Excel document that can be easily uploaded to their address books.

A Banner Cause

For stage backdrops, recycling and reusing should be intrinsic to the design. "We always strive to get backdrops that are timeless and will be used for years and events to come," McCoy says. "That way, if the budget doesn't allow for a digital backdrop and the event needs to make a banner made out of nylon or vinyl, we'll get multiple uses out of it."

When the backdrop is at the end of its shelf life, McCoy suggests partnering with companies that will upcycle banners into backpacks and purses. Better yet, to conserve resources

and minimize waste, consider ditching the backdrop altogether. Instead, McCoy suggests creating stage décor with a combination of lighting and upcycled materials, such as wood pallets, which, with a little bit of paint and artistic reassembly, can make an eco-friendly and budget-sensitive backdrop that's truly one of a kind.

Flowers are also a common part of event décor. Lauren Grech, CEO and co-founder of LLG Events, recommends passing on flowers to a charitable organization, resulting in a tax deduction, or to sustainable vendors that will take used blooms back for composting. "Plan to extend the life of your blooms through companies like Repeat Roses or BloomAgainBklyn," she says. They'll take your arrangements and re-create them into new bouquets for people in need or nursing homes and hospitals, spreading a bit of much-needed joy.

Sharing AV Is Caring

Simultaneously juggling hundreds of details and multiple events is the planner way, and that's just as true when it comes to cutting carbon footprints and containing costs. Says William

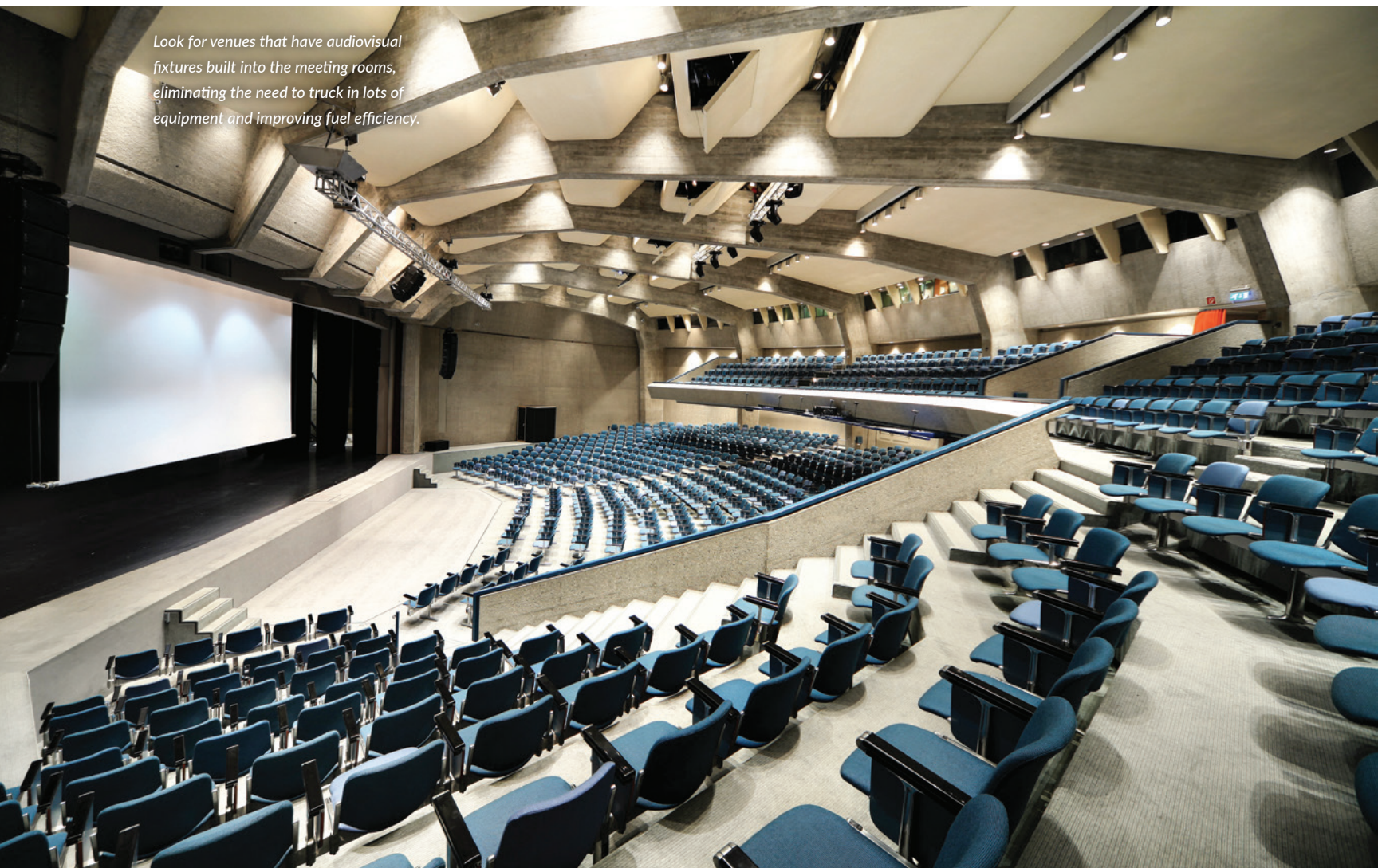
Foote, sales director for PSAV at the Washington Hilton:

"During initial site visits, before final venue selection, that's when planners should be asking questions and looking at the ceiling, eyeballing it for fixed riggings in the ballrooms and built-in AV in breakout spaces. The more equipment that's already in place, the less equipment you'll need to truck in."

That saves time and money on load-in and reduces staffing requirements and carbon emissions, making in-house audiovisual services (though often pricey) more fuel-efficient and eco-friendly than trucking items from neighboring states and beyond. In venues or raw spaces where little is built-in, planners will need to transport materials, so be sure to factor that in. Consider the distance from a vendor's warehouse to the venue, and opt for the most local one possible to limit the negative environmental impact.

Planners should also find out what organization is booked into their venue immediately preceding or following their event load-in, and then ask if that group is open to sharing equipment to cut load-in and teardown costs and the number of truck trips.

Look for venues that have audiovisual fixtures built into the meeting rooms, eliminating the need to truck in lots of equipment and improving fuel efficiency.



“Lighting and sound systems are the easiest things to share,” says Zontine of MEZcreative. “For multiday events, I always try to broker an AV share with the group in the space just before or after me. Granted, it’s not always feasible, but when it does work out, it’s a nice win for us, for them, the AV vendor, and Mother Earth.”

To begin the AV sharing conversation, Zontine suggests asking the venue or AV vendor to be the initial go-between to facilitate an introduction, so you can work out a mutually agreeable arrangement.

Just Enough Swag

Last but not least comes the issue of attendee gifts. While most attendees love a bag brimming with interesting items, free sam-

ples, and perhaps a gift certificate or two, when green is the goal, planners have to think long and hard about the carbon footprint of the items they distribute. No client wants to be called out by eco-conscious attendees, so it’s best to carefully curate the items — and the companies that produce them — before ordering.

To keep swag from heading straight to the landfill, look for useful items in line with the event’s sustainability message. Trade the same old T-shirt or embroidered cap for reusable, stainless-steel, or bamboo drinking straws; responsibly made, organic fabric tote bags; refillable glass water bottles; plantable seed cards; notebooks and luggage tags made of recycled, organic materials; paper-free electronic gift cards; or other eco-friendly options.

To make your swag even greener, “look for purposeful, locally made items that help support the community,”

Follow These Leaders

Fortunately, as the environmental crisis has ramped up, hotel and convention venues around the globe are (at last) fast-tracking the implementation of practices that will help the planet and earn them their green stripes. That could mean Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) or Events Industry Council certifications, event sustainability protocols from the International Organization for Standardization, or adherence to the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Among some of the more innovative efforts:

Portland’s **Oregon Convention Center** employs an in-house sustainability manager to guide efforts and has a rain garden to reduce pollutants from runoff, over 6,500 rooftop solar panels,

and programs for waste recycling, composting, and reusable material donation in partnership with local nonprofits and community assistance organizations.

Mexico’s **Expo Guadalajara**, which recently earned the EarthCheck Silver Certificate for implementing a host of sustainability practices, installed solar panels that have, in less than two years, produced 388,615 kilowatt hours of renewable energy, helping to avoid the production of 194 tons of carbon dioxide.

At **Asilomar Conference Grounds** in Northern California, the historic conference center features a state-of-the-art recycling system that reclaims up to 75% of water used in housekeeping operations. The facility was also the first business on the Monterey Peninsula to send food scraps for composting, which, in tandem with recycling efforts, has led to its 70% diversion rate from the landfill.

Kimpton Hotel Monaco Portland

in Oregon offers groups a special Zero Waste menu, developed as part of a pilot program led by the World Wildlife Fund, with support from The Rockefeller Foundation and the American Hotel & Lodging Association. The program is aimed at further reducing food waste in the hotel industry.

Oregon Convention Center



says Weinshanker of Vosant Meetings and Travel. That way, planners not only give back to the host community, they also reduce the ecological impact associated with the production, transport, and disposal of the swag.

In addition, Weinshanker suggests creating a collection site for any unwanted gift items, which can later be donated to a local charity or organization. Pass It On Please, for example, keeps swag out of landfills by distributing surplus items from trade shows and events to schools and people in need.

Another option, according to Grech of LLG Events: “Find a product that’s beneficial to the environment. For example, at an event we did in Bora Bora, we donated a piece of coral to the venue’s underwater garden in the name of each attendee. So instead of taking something with them, attendees were able to leave something behind that had a positive impact.”

Rethinking swag is an idea planners can take even a step further, assuming the client is agreeable. “The trendiest swag you can have today? It’s no swag at all,” says Eric Wallinger, director of sustainability at MeetGreen, an organization that works with companies to lead sustainable event practices and produce green conferences and events. “But if that’s too extreme for your group, purchase swag only from ethical, sustainability-driven companies like Tentree, which plants 10 trees for each upcycled item purchased. Or take the swag budget and make a donation to a green charity.”

The major message for planners on a sustainability mission: Time is of the essence. It’s no longer an option to let the seemingly little stuff slide — it all matters. Several small changes, if every planner makes them, can move mountains in the effort to create more eco-friendly events.

In New Orleans, where food is king, the **Ernest N. Morial Convention Center** has minimized food waste with composting and food donations. In 2019, it sent 450,000 pounds of compost to the local Composting Network facility and donated over 24,000 pounds of prepared food to the local nonprofit Bethel Colony. The convention center also sold over 17,000 pounds of used cooking oil to a company that turns it into soap and other products, and its team works closely with major exhibit partners to arrange donations to local charities such as Habitat for Humanity.



At **Casa Habita**, a hotel in Guadalajara, Mexico, General Manager Ignacio Romero’s sustainability initiatives include using exclusively local, seasonal food ingredients; offering options to reuse linens and conserve water; and purging all plastic bottles, replacing them with glass-bottled water in rooms and throughout meeting and dining spaces. Romero also incentivizes staff members, encouraging them to bike or take public transportation to work and rewarding them for coming up with ideas to boost the hotel’s sustainable practices.

Nearby, at **Hotel 1970 Posada** in Guadalajara, the staff is focusing on creating a green boxed lunch, including new, organic, plant-based containers made from materials such as agave and banana leaves, as well as quickly biodegrading, corn-made utensils.

The **Kimpton Hotel Monaco Washington, D.C.** has more than 100 daily eco-friendly practices in place throughout the property, including two simple but effective standards that every event venue can easily adopt: serving condiments in bulk instead of individual packages to reduce waste, and adding plants to meeting rooms to help reduce carbon emissions and purify air.

For 2020, **Hilton Worldwide** is expanding its program in the United Kingdom and Europe to divert tons of waste from landfills every year by recycling partially used bars of soap. They’ll be used to create more than 700,000 new bars to distribute to those in need through the brand’s partnership with Clean the World. The soap recycling initiative will support Hilton’s Travel With Purpose 2030 Goals to halve its environmental footprint.

This page: Group hikes should be led by seasoned guides who can adjust the route and intensity based on the participants' capabilities. Opposite: The St. Regis Atlanta's annual 'Out of the Kitchen' event is one way for planners to offer a VIP experience for foodie guests.





The ART of GROUP ACTIVITIES

Memorable, successful outings require research, careful planning, and a creative touch

BY KATE DOYLE HOOPER

With planning, the devil is always in the details, and that holds especially true when creating downtime fun for the group. Among all the general sessions, breakouts, and workshops, arguably one of the biggest challenges is finding memorable activities that allow attendees to engage, network, and bond in an informal atmosphere.



Group Dynamics

When organizing group outings and offsite action, planners should start by asking themselves one question: Who, exactly, is coming to the proverbial party? Attendee characteristics such as age, gender, and hometown are a big factor. Knowing whether the group is, for instance, heavy on female Gen Xers, light on male millennials, and loaded with overseas guests — versus one made up of all boomer businessmen who work in New York City — will greatly influence the choice of activities.

Other factors to discuss with the client include group size, which is important from a logistical standpoint, and activities done in the past, which can offer insight into what has worked well or failed previously. Kelly Diehr of Let's Roam, a team-building scavenger hunt company in Denver, also recommends that planners “ask the client, ‘Why are you hosting this event?’ Then outline the top three goals or desired outcomes so the mission is clear.”

In addition, keep in mind the group's tastes, preferences, and cultural and religious backgrounds. It's up to the planner to ensure that every activity is in line with and sensitive to the group's culture, corporate or otherwise. When working with vendors, particularly internationally, make the client group's policies on matters of race, religion, sexual orientation, and politics crystal clear, not only to the salesperson but also to each guide or instructor who may interact with the group, to help minimize cultural misunderstandings and avoid potential legal problems later.

Build an Activity Buffet

Even with a detailed picture of group demographics, remember that no single activity will have universal appeal. When the event is big enough and has enough budget, the best solution is to use the demographic research to create a shortlist with a variety of options, so there's something for everyone. By letting guests choose their activity, planners offer a more personalized



Opposite: Duck boat tours are always a crowd-pleasing option to show attendees the destination. Above: As the popularity of community service activities grows, more organizations offer programs such as building bikes for local children.

event experience and are likely to see better attendance and engagement. For groups numbering in the low hundreds, cover the bases with three to five choices. For larger groups of 500 or more attendees, cap the list at about eight — running multiple tracks if necessary — so attendees aren't overwhelmed and the experiences maintain a high quality.

A good mix of activities covers a range of skill levels, from easy to challenging, and balances interests. For example, offer one or two cultural options; one or two socially or environmentally conscious options; a food-focused activity; something family-friendly; a spectator sport; an active adventure such as whitewater rafting or a jungle hike; and one that's wellness-themed, such as yoga, meditation, or a spa outing. When the options include outdoor or team-building activities that require physical prowess, opt for programs that won't be difficult or embarrassing for those who aren't athlet-

ically inclined or who have medical limitations or disabilities.

In addition, "try to allow for some flexibility based on what your group is interested in, and, when appropriate, add a newsy or trendy activity to round out the offerings," says Ashley Norman of PHG Consulting, a marketing agency for the travel and hospitality industries.

If possible — and if the budget permits — outsource the activity creation process, Diehr suggests. "Planners already have a lot on their plate, so let the experts take over and create the perfect group activity," she says. Pressed for time? Look for additional ideas and support from the local convention and visitors bureau (CVB) or a destination management company (DMC). And don't be afraid to use more than one vendor. A single vendor may not necessarily have the bandwidth or ability to handle multiple activities simultaneously and flawlessly, so consider spreading the wealth.

Activities by the Generations

When selecting group activities, it's helpful to keep generational preferences in mind. Granted, not every baby boomer will default to a golf tournament and not every millennial will choose a virtual-reality experience, but here are a few pointers from meeting and hospitality pros that will help planners navigate numerical divides.

- **Generation Z and younger millennials** lean toward experiences and enjoy teaming up to work on things they can make, so collaborative activities tend to make an impression. Socially and ecologically conscious outings also strike a chord. On the shortlist for this group are activities such as “makers” workshops, team Olympics, biking adventures, bike builds for charity, beach cleanups, and other outings with a positive impact.
- **Generation X and older millennials** tend to be somewhat more fluid in their preferences. They're comfortable at both ends of the activities spectrum, with the added elements of health and wellness interests, such as high-energy boot camps, spin classes, and outdoor hikes, as well as lower-impact, mind/body/spirit-focused activities such as yoga, meditation, infrared saunas, and stress-reduction exercises.
- **Baby boomers** tend to be comfortable in socially interactive settings but lean toward the competitive, preferring networking or team activities with clear winners and prize incentives. For this group, natural go-to options include mental challenges, such as scavenger hunts or games like *Jeopardy!* or *Family Feud*; team cooking challenges; happy hour receptions; golf outings and spectator sports; and gentler physical activities such as fun runs and educational or historical walking tours.
- **For combo groups made up of boomers, Gen Xers, millennials, and Gen Z guests**, simpler, relaxing activities such as bowling and cooking, either individually or in teams, and snacking on local specialties make bonding and networking organic and easy. Activities with an exclusive or authentic feel — for example, cooking lessons with a top local chef or painting classes in the studio of an accomplished artist — are excellent ways to please a multigenerational group. Another way to create common ground across the generations: sunrise or sunset Instagram walks or (easy) bike rides that give all attendees the opportunity to share their experiences across their favorite social media platforms.

Contributors: The experts at New Orleans' Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, eKrieger LLC, and Out of the Ordinary Group & Team Adventures.

Make It Meaningful

When narrowing down the possible activities, planners should also keep in mind current industry and behavioral trends. One that's making a big impact right now is the increased demand for socially and environmentally conscious activities, which is far exceeding requests for old-school-style outings. Generations X, Y, and Z are reshaping the activities business as they seek the opportunity to give back and positively impact the destination.

In fact, 73% of Americans say they feel an urgency to support causes however they can, according to the 2019 Porter Novelli/Cone Purpose Biometrics Study. For 76%, supporting companies that are addressing social and environmental issues helps them feel as though they are doing their part.

Take cues from Pacific World, a top destination management firm, whose new #BringchangewithME program is upgrading client experiences with hands-on, sustainable, and environmentally and socially conscious activities to help with local needs. For example, in Seoul, South Korea, Pacific World pairs event attendees with local groups so they can bond as they plant trees around the city. In Bali, attendees work with environmental groups on beach cleanup and plastics removal, while in Singapore, guests can engage in bespoke events with the Enabling Village, a project that celebrates and supports local citizens with disabilities.

But it's not just the DMCs embracing more earth-friendly activities; many hotels and resorts also understand their value. Among the most notable is Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort in Fiji, which is renowned for being eco-conscious. It offers groups one-of-a-kind, authentic experiences on its prop-

erty that are steeped in ancient traditions. For example, the Fijian Medicine Walk is a tour that is curated by island elders, is led by the resort's traditional herbal medicine expert, and features more than 120 different species of plants.

At the Willows Lodge outside Seattle, planners can schedule groups to participate in hands-on volunteer activities such as building bikes for charity, cleaning up the riverbank, and tending to local gardens. In Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, groups at the lux-



In Northern California, groups can bring the destination to them with Malene Wines' mobile tasting room, dubbed the Malene Scene.

urious Hotel Mousai and the Marriott Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa can support wildlife conservation by lending a hand to the hotels' biologist-led turtle conservation programs. Groups can help with the release of baby turtles into the ocean to start them on their journey — while creating indelible memories for all.

Take a Test Drive

As your shortlist takes shape, vetting the vendors — both online and on the ground — is a must. Says event director Erin Krieger of eKrieger LLC: "A good place to start vetting is by combining planner word-of-mouth and CVB or DMC suggestions with opinion sites like TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Viator. For cross-referencing, I also like Google reviews, which tend to be a bit more 'real' and unfiltered."

Even with those resources, an in-person test drive is key. It helps planners pick up on a lot of clues and potential red flags that would be impossible to catch otherwise. Without personal

vetting, activity selection becomes risky business, not only for the guests but for the planner's reputation as well. If time or money is short and the planner can't personally experience an activity, they can send a savvy subordinate to sample the offerings or, in a pinch, hire a seasoned, local event pro to stand in, report back with videos (or live via FaceTime or Skype), and make recommendations.

Guided to Success

A big contributor to a successful group tour is the guide, so pay attention to first impressions during the test drive, Norman advises. Do the guides present themselves well? Do they appear confident? Trustworthy? Knowledgeable? Are they well-spoken and enthusiastic? In uniform and/or tidily dressed? First impressions offer a window into what the client group will experience, so make sure it's positive. Another desirable trait: "a guide who really connects with people, as



Above: For planners looking to tap into the wellness trend in events, yoga and other low-impact physical activities are a good option for groups of varying abilities. Opposite: Younger millennial and Gen Z attendees in particular enjoy eco-conscious excursions such as beach cleanups.

they will make or break your guests' experience," Norman says.

A guide with plenty of expertise is essential, too, but be aware that not everyone who passed the ministry of tourism's "official guide" test is an effective group leader, so the only way to know is to check them out. For educational, historical, and culinary tours, make sure the guide has not only knowledge but also the ability to entertain with storytelling. Nothing kills a tour experience faster than a guide soullessly regurgitating facts and figures they've committed to memory.

For tours that are more physically demanding, particularly outdoor adventures, "make sure you have a naturalist along — one who's also able to gauge and adjust the difficulty of the trek to the abilities of the entire group in real time," Norman says. "And on a practical level, confirm that the guide has some basic first-aid training, plus a first-aid kit."

Not convinced a particular guide will be a good fit? Try test-driving the same tour a second time with another guide for comparison.



Location, Location, Location

Along with finding a good guide, planners should take advantage of the destination's truly unique offerings — those “only-in-(insert city)” attractions and activities. Eventing in Los Angeles? Add a bike tour along the Venice Beach canals and Pacific Ocean. Gathering in Guadalajara, Mexico? Take the group out to experience the 500-year-old equestrian traditions of the *charros*, or Mexican cowboys, at the rodeo. Convening

in El Salvador? Send the history buffs on a jungle tour with an ex-guerrilla fighter in Cinquera Rainforest Park.

Says Krieger: “Certainly zip-line, foodie, and duck boat tours are always crowd-pleasers, but be sure to stack your agenda with as many truly unique-to-the-location activities as possible. Let the destination drive the majority of your activity choices.”

Excursions with an authentic local feel will make memories — and make guests feel as though they’ve experienced at least one essential aspect of the area, if only for a few hours.

Listen to Mother Nature

Many local experiences, though, rely on good weather. If a client insists on a group outing to a football game in Boston in December, it’s time to push back firmly (or book an enclosed suite!). The same holds true for fun runs in Miami in July (high humidity season) or Malaysia in November (monsoon season). No one can override Mother Nature, so check the seasonal forecasts for the destination long before booking group activities.

Time zones are another potential challenge. If the planner has jet lag, then it’s likely that a good number of attendees will, too. While some folks may be raring to go for that 6 a.m. yoga class, plenty of others will happily snooze right through it. After-hours events can suffer the same fate, particularly for those who have crossed multiple time zones to attend. Bottom line: Be conscious of where the bulk of the attendees are based, and consider how severely jet lag may affect their alertness (or lack thereof) throughout the day.

Punctuality can also be an issue with tour operators and their schedules, Norman says. “In some cultures, time is more conceptual than actual, so make sure the operator understands that 2 p.m. means 2 p.m. sharp, not 2:20 or 2:30 p.m., or whenever the transportation happens to show up.” Once everyone is

Venue Inspiration Across the Ages

Increasingly, hotels are getting into the group activities act as well, offering an ever-growing list of unique ways for attendees of all ages to get out of the ballroom and experience a few special aspects of the destination. Hotel-curated activities give attendees a convenient and truly local, small group experience, while planners benefit from a short menu of pre-vetted activities with built-in logistical hotel support — so everyone wins!

Casa Habita, Guadalajara, Mexico

- **For Gen Z**, which leans toward a mix of solo and group experiences, Casa Habita has created a staff-led Neighborhood Bike Tour of the area's midcentury buildings designed by noted Mexican modernist architect Luis Barragán, all while pedaling on vintage bikes.
- **Millennials** enjoy experiences, so Casa Habita offers group options that are unique to the region, starting with the Tequila Discovery program, which includes welcome cocktails at check-in; private tastings of small-batch, artisanal tequilas at a local cocktail bar; day trips to the agave fields and distilleries; and walking tours of the quaint town of Tequila.



Tours of agave fields and tequila distilleries help Casa Habita connect with millennials.

- **For multigenerational groups**, there are themed Foodies' Night experiences, mixing traditional elements such as wine tastings and special food pairings with unexpected twists, such as mystical tarot card readings and instant (temporary) tattoos between courses.

Hilton La Romana, Dominican Republic

- **Generation Z attendees** or those with an entrepreneurial spirit can visit local coffee and cocoa bean growers to learn how to harvest the plants.
- **Millennials** can connect with their inner *Game of Thrones* characters with archery lessons on the lawn or blow off steam with their colleagues during a kitchen plate-smashing activity.
- **Gen Xers** can fight conference stress with a group (or solo) onsite activity that's guaranteed to take the edge off: a warm sand bed treatment or a peaceful, guided meditation manicure.
- **For multigenerational groups**, the hotel arranges excursions to a botanical sanctuary, as well as whale- and dolphin-watching expeditions, all minutes from the venue.

on their way (hopefully in a timely manner), take advantage of the travel time to educate participants, brief them on the experience to come, and go over logistics and housekeeping items.

Lastly, remember that off-site activities are vulnerable to delays from local traffic, which can turn a 20-minute transfer into a stress-filled, hourlong odyssey. To best manage the timing, Krieger recommends a three-pronged approach: First, press the operator for accurate and realistic transit times. Second, factor in what time of day the transfers will occur to avoid rush hour and peak travel times. And finally, find out if the activities are scheduled on or near a major holiday. It takes only one late start or traffic jam to undo the day's plans, forcing activities to be cut short in order to rush everyone back to the hotel for a mandatory group dinner.

Explore the Great Indoors

Though ideally, every planner wants to get attendees off-campus to enjoy the destination city for a few hours, sometimes tight conference schedules simply don't permit it. In that case, think about options on the venue property and bring activities inside.

For example, The Londoner in London's West End (opening June 2020) features multiple social spaces, two screening rooms, and a salon and spa that can host several activities simultaneously. At The Venetian Macao, planners can book tickets to a world-class rock con-

Scavenger hunts curated by companies such as Denver-based Let's Roam allow guests to participate in team-building while getting out into the destination city.



cert; offer spa treatments, shopping experiences, and gondola rides; or send the group on a trip to the world of immersive multimedia art at the new 3D digital museum, SuperNature — all on the resort's property.

For a truly unique on-campus activity, book a table or two at The St. Regis Atlanta for Out of the Kitchen, its annual gourmet dining event, which is held in the fall and features 20 top chefs cooking tableside, all to benefit Cure Childhood Cancer. Planners should book early, though — tickets sell out fast — or work with the venue to create a custom culinary event for their group.

Rethink the Box

For venues with more limited offerings, planners may need to get creative and collaborate with onsite staff and/or a CVB or DMC to rethink how to use on-property spaces for group activities. Consider repurposing spare breakout rooms or a spacious Presidential Suite to host in-house programs such

as morning yoga, boot-camp workouts, tastings, and pop-up shopping experiences, which will still deliver the networking opportunities and mental break that attendees need without leaving home base.

Got a parking lot? Then book a truly mobile, no-travel activity such as a video-gaming truck; a food truck serving local cuisine; a visit from the Bubble Brothers' traveling Prosecco Van and Bubble Bike in England or New York City; or a sampling from Malene Wines' fully tricked-out, custom 1969 Airstream mobile tasting room in California. Just be sure to work closely with the venue to fulfill any requirements and follow all policies for outside vendors.

In the end, research, experience, judgment, and client input are all essential elements in the activities alchemy. The key, however, is to let go of personal biases and never lose sight of the attendees — their wants, their needs, and their definition of fun. With all the elements in place, every planner can count on creating a memorable experience every time.