

Going Green

How show organizers can reduce their environmental footprint

By Kenya McCullum

With the groundswell of support around the green movement ever increasing, many companies are implementing policies to decrease their environmental footprint. The trade show industry is no different, especially in light of the fact that the United States Environmental Protection Agency has deemed it the second most wasteful industry in the country—with the construction business being the first. In order to rectify this problem, many trade show organizers are becoming proactive and investigating ways to produce more environmentally-friendly shows.

“We have a social responsibility to reduce our impact, which more and more industries and companies are beginning to realize,” said Iain Mackenzie, the Manager of Meetings and Events at the International Sign Association. “From a show organizer perspective, we want to promote our green efforts.”

But are those green efforts costly expenses that will negatively impact a show’s bottom line? Not necessarily, experts say. In fact, if an organizer plans carefully, transitioning to green practices can be done quite affordably.

“Oftentimes there are premiums for recycled content and environmentally-friendly materials that are not in high demand. But on the flip side, if you do not print a service kit on paper, you have eliminated that cost. If you look hard and long enough, you will find materials that are less expensive than the traditional ones. If you conserve energy, your utility bill goes down,” said Sandy Voss, group show director of New Hope Natural Media—a company that specializes in the healthy lifestyle industry. “I have even seen in some centers that trash hauls cost, but recycling is free and standard sampling supplies come at a premium compared to biodegradable ones. At the end of the day, if you diversify you are probably breaking even and, as demand and supply meet, we will probably see some cost savings. At our events we are even profiting by selling green sponsorships.”

The ability for show organizers to use their green efforts as a sales and marketing tool is not surprising given the widespread concern about the environment and corporate responsibility. Oftentimes, Voss added, consumers are looking to do business with companies that employ green practices and pass on those that do not. “As a consumer, it is a selling point for me and sometimes a deal breaker. In addition, it is just plain good for the environment and the world we live in,” she said. “It is environmentally irresponsible not to consider the impact we have and the ability we have to make change.”

And when an event organizer is ready to make this change, it is important to remember that a show cannot go green overnight and it can take several show cycles to implement greener practices. But do not be discouraged, as there are several baby steps that you can take to get started.

- **Signage:** Since many signs and posters used at shows are made from non-recyclable materials, such as foam, an organizer can attempt to either reuse the signs from year to year or adopt a digital signage system.
- **Badges:** Collect plastic badge holders from attendees to use again at the next show. This may be a difficult task, but organizers can hold contests and offer prizes at the end of the event to make returning the badges more attractive. Otherwise, an organizer can switch to badges made from materials such as biodegradable polypropylene.
- **Reducing Paper:** Using CDs and Web sites for educational materials or adopting a lead retrieval system instead of asking exhibitors to bring numerous pamphlets to an event can dramatically reduce the amount of paper used.
- **Food and Drinks:** If meals are being served at an event, an organizer can cut down waste by replacing plastic and paper utensils with china or silverware. If the show has an

area where cocktails are served, an organizer can cut down on paper usage by instructing the bartender to only give out napkins to attendees per request. Also, buying bottled water can be costly for any show and it leaves behind a huge footprint. To reduce this expense and the detrimental effect on the environment, an organizer can give attendees and staff reusable bottles and equip the floor with water coolers.

- **Accommodations:** Attendees may already make their accommodation decisions based on the green practices of local hotels, but an organizer can further these efforts by securing as many hotel rooms as possible that are within walking distance of the event.

Once show organizers have begun applying strategies to make their event green, they will find that they feel good about having a show that is more environmentally friendly—a feeling that is often shared by exhibitors and attendees alike. “The biggest benefit they see is that we are contributing to keeping the environment friendly,” said Jana Brown, associate director of conference events at the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, which produces the Golf Industry Show. “It is a feel good thing and it is something we need to do.”