



Powered by Clickability

Commentary: Time to Deliver Climate Solutions for Meetings and Events

Dec 15, 2009 9:38 AM, By Mitchell Beer, CMM

It's too soon to say whether world leaders now meeting in Copenhagen for the United Nations climate summit will reach a serious deal to control climate change.

Over the weekend, the *The New York Times*'s Andrew Revkin blogged about the new seriousness that seemed to characterize the early days of the summit. "In the negotiations, the intensity has ramped up far faster than at previous treaty conferences I've covered over the years," he wrote. "To my mind this is due to the consequential nature of things this time. Push really finally is coming to shove over emissions and money."

But whatever way things go over the next three days, there are changes ahead for meetings and conventions—an industry that is hugely dependent on cheap oil and coal, and is a major producer of carbon emissions.

If negotiations fail, scientists say that coastal and island destinations are likely to be inundated by rising sea levels. Last week, Carbon Solutions America published [a map](#) that showed Florida in 2100 with Miami, Orlando, and Key West, Fla., under water. Scientists also see increases in extreme weather, famine, and armed conflict due to severe shortages of food and water, all heralding a global community too poor in resources and lacking in the necessary stability for a meetings industry to exist.

If negotiations at the climate summit are successful, every country and every industry will need to get onboard with the massive changes needed to avert catastrophic climate change.

To get a sense of what needs to be done, I turned to meetings industry experts, asking them for their thoughts on the easiest, most immediate steps our industry can take to begin reducing its impact on global warming.

Travel is the single biggest part of an event's carbon footprint, said Elizabeth Henderson, chief strategist for Down2Earth, a Calgary-based sustainable event consulting startup. "To achieve immediate reductions, the industry should look at logistic solutions since this is where they have the most control and, likely, the most expertise." By regionalizing events or locating them close to the majority of participants, planners can open up the option of train travel. Organizations can also consider a hybrid approach to meetings, she noted, using technology to carry on working relationships that have already been cemented face-to-face.

Marge Anderson, former international board member at Meeting Professionals

International and associate director at the Energy Center of Wisconsin, said meeting facilities have an important role to play. "Since most electricity [to operate and illuminate buildings] still comes from coal-fired power generation, reducing energy use is one of the most significant steps a facility can take to reduce its carbon footprint," she said. "And saving energy has positive impacts for a facility's operating bottom line." Most U.S. utilities offer technical assistance, low-interest loans, and cash incentives to help building owners cut their electricity use.

"For our segment of the events industry, equipment is the biggie," said Midori Connolly, a principal at Pulse Staging in San Diego. Switching audiovisual monitors from plasma to LCD and, soon, to LED technology can cut power consumption 50 percent, she noted. Eventually, LED projectors will offer a 25,000- to 60,000-hour life cycle between lamp replacements, reducing the time, cost, and carbon footprint associated with more frequent replacement.

"Besides equipment, shipping is a no-brainer," Connolly said. "According to the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], by 2012, ground freight transportation will consume more than 45 billion gallons of diesel fuel and produce more than 450 million metric tons of carbon dioxide." By working with local partners and shipping fewer, fuller loads, AV suppliers can reduce pollutants and save carbon with a strategy that lends itself to easy measurement and reporting.

The first step for transportation companies is to inventory their greenhouse gas emissions, said Sarah Champoux, environmental director at Green Ride Global Inc. in Toronto. After that, "minimizing idling by drivers through awareness and incentives is a very important and easy step," she said. Vehicles must undergo regular maintenance and emissions testing, and companies can use fuel consumption data to track and guide drivers' behavior.

Megan Rooksby, procurement specialist with Maxvantage Meetings, New York, recommended managing and measuring waste, locating meetings to reduce travel distances, meeting virtually, and purchasing food and other products with a smaller carbon footprint. "Buying welcome gifts from China might be cost-effective for the overall gift budget," she said, "but did anyone think about the energy and resources used to create the product, the shipping and packing materials, and the distance and transportation costs the product incurred to make it to your meeting? Sure, you created jobs for people around the world, but at what cost?"

Every meeting professional contacted for this column agreed on the need for effective measurement to gain a better understanding of the industry's carbon footprint. Nancy Wilson, a principal at MeetGreen in Portland, Ore., said the new green meeting standards under development by the Convention Industry Council's Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX) "will be a good step if we can get the industry to adopt them."

Wilson said it's crucial for the industry to "understand that travel is a privilege, not a right, and [to] meet in person only when necessary." But she and Henderson predicted resistance as the need to cut carbon hits home.

"Our biggest obstacle is our own industry, and our inability to believe that there is a new reality," Wilson said. "Many of us still believe that VIP service includes having all the lights on when you arrive in your room, a new soap every time you leave the room, and fresh sheets and towels daily. In the future, first-class service won't include any of those, but it will include free Internet in your room!"

Mitchell Beer, CMM, is president and CEO of [The Conference Publishers Inc.](#), one of the world's leading specialists in capturing and repurposing conference content. He has more details from the interviews at the company blog, [The Edge](#). Send comments, facts, arguments, or column ideas to mitchell@theconferencepublishers.com.

Find this article at:

http://www.meetingsnet.com/corporatemeetingsincentives/news/beer_climate_solutions_1215/index.html

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2008 Penton Media, Inc. All rights reserved.