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Commentary: Making "Green Meetings" Redundant

Feb 16, 2010 9:59 AM, By Mitchell Beer, CMM

My head is still spinning with ideas, enthusiasm, and wall-to-wall content from last week's 2010 Sustainable Meetings Conference in Denver, hosted by the [Green Meeting Industry Council](#).

I'll declare my interest up front: I've just finished two years as co-chairman of the GMIC programs committee, and I joined the association's board in July. But you didn't have to be a sustainable meetings specialist to feel the momentum on site. With a 66 percent increase in members in the past year, a presence in 30 countries, its first four chapters in place, and the new [APEX/ASTM sustainable meeting standards](#) just months away from release, GMIC is on a roll.

But for many of the veteran meeting professionals who attended the conference, making sustainability an industry watchword won't be enough. By the time they're done, they want to purge the language of "green meetings" from the industry lexicon. Not because they see sustainability as a fad that has come and gone, but because they now foresee the day when *every* meeting will be a green meeting.

It's a bold vision, at a time when many planners and suppliers figure they've done their bit to green their operations. Denver participants learned how to strengthen their conference programs, improve ROI, embrace technology and social media, and trim their budgets—all with strategies that make meetings greener.

The unexpected takeaway was that some of the industry's best green efforts are tackling only the smallest fraction of the problem.

Keynote speaker Annie Leonard, creator of the book, video, and Web site [The Story of Stuff](#), got the ball rolling with her comment that, for every pound of garbage we recycle or divert on site, we miss another 70 pounds hidden in the supply chain that ends at the loading dock. That got me thinking that we won't have a truly sustainable meeting—economically, environmentally, or socially—until we move our whole focus upstream.

The waste hidden behind an on-site recycling program is an obvious example, but the concept extends to everything that goes into a meeting.

New technologies are slashing energy requirements for on-site equipment and lighting. If we can reduce that part of our carbon footprint with efficient bulbs, or cut it 100 percent by buying renewable power, which has the greater impact? (Actually, we should do both. But if we had to choose—?)

Many CVBs are working to brand their destinations in various shades of green. How much better would it be if they moved upstream and formed partnerships with community groups that work for green energy, clean air and water, or other things that make a city liveable?

Among meeting facilities, most of the talk about sustainable meetings comes out of sales and marketing. How much greener would those buildings be, and how much more money would their sustainability programs save them, if engineering, catering, and housekeeping were more directly involved in the conversation?

Moving upstream takes us outside the usual conversations within the industry and might take some meeting professionals outside their comfort zones. But it's an essential step on the road to making the phrase "green meeting" redundant.

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