

17 ways to make conferences



Carbon-neutral events may not be possible yet, but there are big changes planners can make to help protect the planet

By Mark Williams

An unfortunate and unavoidable fact about the events industry is that it tends to create a lot of waste. Whether it's leftover food or the carbon emissions created by powering a venue for a 2,000-delegate conference, getting a lot of people together in one place can have a huge environmental impact.

A report by the UN Environment Programme states: "If we are serious about averting catastrophic planetary changes, we need to reduce emissions by 45 per cent by 2030."

So how can we all play our part? We've picked the brains of industry experts to find out how events can be greener, less wasteful and leave behind a better environmental legacy.

1 DITCH DISPOSABLE FREEBIES

Everyone loves a free gift, but that doesn't have to involve giving away plastic key rings and gimmicks that inevitably end up in the bin. Abena Poku-Awuah, Managing Director of Legacy Events says: "We recently gave away 'seed bombs' – little compact bombs of wildflower seeds. We sourced them in sustainable bags and, honestly, we were mobbed. If you get it right and find a freebie that works, they can be really popular."

2 OFFER EDIBLE GIVEAWAYS

"We used branded mince pies featuring the client's logo on the icing at one event," says Poku-Awuah. "They were so popular that I didn't even get the chance to taste one."

3 CHOOSE CONVENIENCE OVER GLAMOUR

When it comes to finding a venue, event planners should choose a location that is easy for most attendees to get to, rather than the most glamorous. "Sometimes that gets superseded by putting the event in a place that everyone wants to visit, which is a slightly different thing," says Poku-Awuah. "You can reduce the distances that people have to travel by not holding events in hard-to-reach places."

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4 FIND ALTERNATIVES TO FLYING

The aviation industry produces 2.5% of total carbon emissions, which could rise to 22% by 2050. To help offset this trend, rather than offering to fly delegates to a conference, you should ask if there's an alternative route they would be willing to take. "People question the impact of Greta Thunberg sailing to America on a boat, but it's about normalising other transport options," says Poku-Awuah. "Some people might be receptive to taking a day longer and getting the ferry over. The next time they go to an event, they are more likely to ask: 'Where's the ferry or train option?'"

5 MAKE PUBLIC TRANSPORT EASY

Try to make greener travel options at the destination easy, suggests Poku-Awuah.

"Supporting people when they arrive in the host town or city is important," she says. "Most people's first instinct when they get to a destination they don't know is to jump in a taxi, but the event organiser can give them comprehensive public transport information for when they arrive."

6 HITCH A RIDE WITH SOMEONE ELSE

"Encourage guests to avoid travelling by car wherever possible, but if they do require a car, make them aware of more eco-friendly options," says Sam Morris, Community Manager of car-sharing app Hiyacar. The introduction of this kind of car-sharing facility allows for short-term rental of cars from people in the local community.

7 CONSIDER A STAYCATION

"Modern technology means the necessary lighting, sound equipment and projectors exist to create an awesome experience nearly anywhere," says Morris. "For a corporate event, this even opens up the possibility of a company using its own space."

8 KEEP YOUR EVENT PAPER-FREE

Going paper-free is best, but it's not fair to assume that everyone has access to a smartphone, says Poku-Awuah. "We're paper-free by default but if our clients really push for a paper option and we can't persuade them otherwise, we'll print a limited amount of programmes for people that really need them," she says.



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1.3 billion tonnes of food gets lost or wasted globally every year

9 MAKE YOUR EVENT PLASTIC-FREE

Heightened public awareness about the plastic problem in our oceans means that having single-use plastic at your event is not only irresponsible but a potential PR nightmare. As a starting point, Raw Foundation suggests introducing reusable cups and water bottles, banning plastic straws and having reusable, rather than event-specific, lanyards and name badges.

10 MEASURE YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT

“For a conference, one of the biggest sources of emissions is going to be the flights bringing delegates in,” says Dr Wendy Buckley, co-founder of carbonfootprint.com, a sustainability consultancy that helps organisations with their carbon and environmental management.

“Other emissions include what’s generated at the conference centre with heating, power and air conditioning and breakdown of the stands. How many hotel rooms are being occupied and what are the emissions associated with that? Those are just a few of the elements that need to be quantified for an event’s carbon footprint analysis.”

11 ONCE IT’S MEASURED, OFFSET THE CARBON

Carbon offsetting projects either reduce emissions directly or invest in technologies to ‘de-carbonise’ the national grids in the countries they serve. One popular method of offsetting is planting trees. However, this is just one of many options, says Dr Buckley.

“Other projects include solar power generation, wind turbines or small-scale hydropower projects that preserve the environment in their region. There’s also a whole selection of carbon offsets that have humanitarian benefits. In Uganda, there is a clean-water borehole project, which as well as mitigating the carbon emissions is helping to improve health in developing communities by preventing water-borne illnesses.”

12 DONATE ANY LEFTOVER FOOD

There are loads of brilliant apps out there which are solely aimed at preventing food waste. Too Good To Go links people with restaurants that have leftover meals at the end of the day, while OLIO connects neighbours with each other and has a team of Food Waste Heroes that pick up leftovers from all kinds of locations. In hospitality, Winnow focuses on helping hotels track and measure their food waste, which can help cut food costs by up to 8%.



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SUSTAINABILITY

13 AVOID SERVING BEEF AND LAMB

Following a vegan diet is the single biggest way to reduce your impact on the planet, according to researchers at the University of Oxford, so event planners should consider taking meat and dairy off the menu. “That’s the ideal, but we’re not there yet,” says Poku-Awuah. “So for those events where a vegan or vegetarian menu isn’t acceptable, you can look at removing the most carbon-emitting foods, like beef, lamb and dairy – essentially products from grazing animals that take energy and space to raise.”

14 CHOOSE LOCAL BREWS

“We always try and find the local craft brewery for an event and serve their beers,” says Poku-Awuah. “It’s generally cheaper or at least the same price as big-name brands because it’s being produced down the road. And it’s just a bit more interesting – it can be a talking point. Wine can be trickier depending on where you are. But if your event is in the UK, for example, you can source wines that are produced closer than Australia or New Zealand.”

Look at removing the most carbon-emitting foods, like lamb and beef

15 GO FOR GREEN HOTELS

When looking for more environmentally friendly hotels, there are so many different accreditations that it can be difficult to know which ones are really meaningful, says Poku-Awuah.

“There’s a good website called Green Tourism [which promotes sustainable tourism], but there’s a lot of less useful ones out there,” she explains. “And hotels aren’t always that transparent about what they’re doing. If you ask a hotel chain a question and get a generic answer back, just push a bit more, because at the end of the day, you’re the client and they will want to please you.”

16 DON’T BE HUMBLE, BRAG ABOUT IT

There’s no harm in telling everyone about your sustainable credentials or using as them part of your event marketing.

“The general thinking is that clients love it. They want to know that you’ve thought about these things and rolled out something new and different for their event,” says Poku-Awuah. “You should absolutely shout about it.”



17 REMEMBER THAT SUSTAINABILITY AND CSR ARE INTERTWINED

StaceyLynn Hoaglan, Director of EMEA Internal Events at Dell Technologies, on how the company is tackling its sustainability challenges

What sustainability and CSR initiatives does Dell have at the moment?

We have sustainability reports produced by a team whose sole focus is on the subject. I look at the events we're putting on and think about the impact they have. Whether it's talking to a venue about single-use plastic or looking at how economical they're being, we want to make sure these things are a priority for our event partners.

Is it the same for incentives?

Absolutely. We were in Bermuda recently for a five-day incentive with 800 members of our team. While we were there, we worked with Keep Bermuda Beautiful for a beach cleaning. We also painted containers on the beaches for people to throw their rubbish away.

Do people find that kind of thing rewarding?

Yes they do, and I'm always amazed by the response we get to any kind of CSR activity at an event. In the case of Bermuda, they were so happy to experience all of the things they did while on the island that they were happy to spend an hour-and-a-half of their time to give a little bit back.

How would you advise those looking to make their events more sustainable in the future?

Let people know that you are doing things with sustainability in mind. So if you say to someone you'd love for them to take a train rather than a taxi, tell them it's because you're trying to make the event as green as possible. Some of it is going to be hard to implement, but it's about people understanding why you're doing it and practicing what you preach.

What are you doing at some of your events that's a little bit different?

We're looking at using badges that can be made into garden furniture afterwards. We'll have some examples of the furniture at the venue so that we can say: 'If you give us your badge after the event, it will go into making a chair like that.'



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