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It's Easy Being Green in New England: Choices Expand for Environmentally Friendly Meetings

By Bruce Fears, President, ARAMARK Harrison Lodging

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As "green" options in the meeting and conference industry expand, environmentally conscious event planners, organizers and companies in New England are finding that going "green" not only helps save the planet and resources on a local level, but also offers a wealth of other benefits and advantages.

If you've ever considered having a "green meeting," or pondered the advantages of holding a conference or training session at an environmentally conscious conference center, there are a few things to consider before going "green." As the following questions and answers demonstrate, green meetings can help save the planet and yield real rewards for conference/hotel attendees and budget.

What exactly is a "green meeting?"

After convening a Task Force on this topic, the Convention Industry Council presented this definition: "A green meeting or event incorporates environmental considerations to minimize its negative impact on the environment."

The Task Force met in 2003 to create minimum best practices for event organizers and suppliers to use as guidelines for implementing policies of sustainability. The Council's Green Meetings Report also presents guidelines for running environmentally friendly events.

Will a green meeting or training session feel different from a regular event?

Most attendees likely won't discern any difference at all in their day-to-day experience. Conference centers offering green events carefully integrate environmental considerations so they are not particularly noticeable. In fact, many are actually "behind the scenes," such as environmentally sound choices that conserve energy and water. Some practices, such as using recycled paper products or biodegradable cleaning products, are imperceptible. Others, such as landscaping with native plants, simply add a pleasant sense of place to the surroundings.

Other than "feel good" benefits of a green meeting, how will it actually benefit me?

We're all more concerned about our health and weight these days, concerns that can be even more challenging to manage when we travel for business. It's easier to make healthy eating choices when staying at a conference center that offers fresh organic and/or vegetarian alternatives on its menus, buffets and break stations.

ARAMARK has a commitment to "sustainable cuisine," which means foods grown and harvested in ways that are most healthful and least harmful to the environment. Menus at some AHL conference centers and at ARAMARK Parks dining facilities provide a selection of organic dishes that use produce and foods grown and raised without pesticides or chemical fertilizers.

Examples include the shade tree-grown coffee served at all the parks as well as seafood only from species populations that are not currently under threat of extinction by over-fishing. Some green destinations "flavor" a meeting with inspiration from local cultures.

But won't all these green features make my session more expensive?

A green event doesn't cost the earth. On the contrary, the economies of sustainable building design and energy conservation measures are significant. Even smaller choices add up to big savings. Serving condiments in bulk is less expensive than individual serving packages—bulk cream is 62 percent less expensive and bulk sugar 50 percent less expensive than single serving sachets (Meeting Strategies Worldwide, 2002).^{*} Savings that impact the bottom line for a conference venue can translate to extra value for its clients.

As an organizer of learning and training events, you can rely on green conference centers for information about saving materials—and money—during your sessions. For example, ask the staff for advice about preparing electronic rather than printed handouts. Consider giving everyone in your group a reusable coffee mug as a welcome gift at the start of the session. Inquire if drinking water in your meeting room can be provided in pitchers instead of individual bottles, or request help in collecting name badge holders at the end of the session. For an event of 1,300 attendees, reusing these holders can save approximately \$975 for the event organizer.*

Do green meetings REALLY make a difference to the environment?

Consider this amazing fact: The average hotel purchases more products in one week than 100 families typically do in a year. Add to this the products and services used for learning and training events and it's easy to see why environmentally aware conference centers can have a huge impact.

ARAMARK Harrison Lodging's environmental conscientiousness influences every aspect of the company's operations and the program's impressive statistics prove its success. Here are just a few examples:

- Bulk amenity dispensers in guest rooms save the disposal of over 1,000,000 individually packaged amenities into landfills annually.
- A towel and linen reuse program in over 5,000 guest rooms saves an estimated 21 million gallons of water annually.
- When running on propane, ARAMARK's bi-fuel trucks release approximately 40 percent fewer emissions than vehicles using gasoline.
- ARAMARK's award-winning Trash Tracker program collected over 676,000 lbs. of trash from Lake Powell in 2005.

Asked about ARAMARK's commitment to going above and beyond the call of environmental responsibility, Dean Crane replies, "We see this as more than our corporate duty. Currently,

we have programs in place to protect and conserve natural resources for the enjoyment of future generations, and we are in the process of expanding that commitment. That is our number-one priority.”

What’s the future for green meetings?

It’s an initiative that is gaining momentum, thanks to the commitment of hospitality industry leaders and positive response from guests. A key incentive for both providers and consumers of green meetings is that the impact of these events is both positive and measurable.

Leadership from organizations like the Green Meeting Industry Council is invaluable. The Council promotes green practices globally by offering educational programs in the form of training workshops and online resources. The Council is in the process of partnering with educational institutions to develop an accredited curriculum at the university level for green meetings.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is supporting the initiative with its One-Stop Information Source for Green Meetings on the Internet at www.epa.gov/oppt/greenmeetings/. This EPA site helps you organize a green event with specific suggestions for planners, conference hosts and suppliers, as well as for attendees.

By the year 2020 the Green Meeting Industry Council envisions a green meeting as an activity that has zero net environmental effects and positively contributes to the environment and host communities. This is a vision we can help achieve by making choices that reward green meeting venues with your business. Together we can make today’s “brown” events a thing of the past.

*Statistics courtesy of Green Meeting Industry Council website.

About the Author

Bruce Fears Bruce, president of ARAMARK Harrison Lodging, has more than 30 years of experience in the hospitality industry. He is responsible for ARAMARK’s operations at more than 50 conference centers, corporate training centers and specialty hotels in educational environments, as well as 16 national, state parks and other resort operations across the United States. For more information, visit www.aramarkharrisonlodging.com, or call 800-422-MEET.