

Good for the planet; good for the bottom line

When it comes to finding sustainable ways to deliver conferences and other corporate get-togethers World Events has gone beyond being a thought-leader. Graham Keene explains how his global company's commitment to sustainable events led to an international conference in a field in Yorkshire.

More than thirty years after Jonathon Porritt helped found the Green Party he is still addressing conferences on how to deliver, among other things, sustainable conferences. "Most events are still managed," he told the April Sustainable Events Symposium in London's Wimpole Street, "without regard to the environment or to sustainability writ large." My company, World Events, is a full-service global event management agency that delivers live international events around the world. In 2009 we organised over 330 events in 40 countries for over 33,000 delegates, which means that our choices, on behalf of companies like Chanel, Philips, and Johnson and Johnson, can have scaleable repercussions. As individuals and as a company we are keen to embrace environmental and social sustainability but like many we have always been told that going green would cost more. Before offering green solutions to our clients we decided to deliver our own annual company conference to the highest sustainable standards and document whether the myth was true or false.

Traditionally our annual company conference has taken place at the beginning of the year. Our first environmentally responsible decision, made at the previous year's conference, was to move the 2009 event to the summer. More daylight and less need for keeping warm meant that lighting and heating energy would be saved and we could feasibly move outside the confines of what Porritt calls "airless, lightless, soulless 'bunker' venues". From an environmental perspective, our objectives were to source an environmentally, eco-friendly and socially responsible venue to accommodate 150 people for a company conference and evening social. It was highly desirable that the venue was willing to work alongside World Events to help produce the company's most green conference to date and share our commitment to manage the event in accordance with the company's approach for best practice in the planning of an event. Called, and indeed trademarked, as our Triple Impact approach, this means every event we deliver minimises the impact on the environment, delivers a social impact by leaving a legacy with the local community and maximizes the commercial return for the event's stakeholders, its return on investment (ROI). Our 2009 event brought a fourth benefit, an opportunity for the whole company to experience all the sustainable aspects first hand so that they could share the experience with their clients.

With planning having begun at the 2008 conference, it was imperative to maintain momentum and, with staff in offices in ten countries, it was necessary to put functional – and green – communications in place. We used the internally developed online meeting management tool, AgoraLive, for all pre-event planning communication as well as to send out email teasers and reminders. A branded website, screensaver with a "countdown to the event" clock and a link to a blogging site using Web 2.0 software were all used to good effect and we are confident that this helped showcase best practice to staff from an online meeting management perspective while eliminating the need for printed materials.

After traditional conferences, a forest of paper can go in the (albeit re-cycling) bin and is very often joined by event-specific signage. To avoid this waste all our signs were printed directly onto plywood which was then recycled and turned into bird boxes. At the other end of the technology scale we used Spotme devices throughout the conference rather than printing delegate materials. Spotme call their product the "Swiss army knife of interactive meeting tools" and it certainly provides networking, audience response and participant management tools while negating the need for delegate brochures, noticeboards and other paper-dependent communication media.

To help 'sell' the conference we used a music festival concept which helped deliver an experience that both motivated and educated staff about the company and about sustainable events specifically. The title 'Festival 09: our business rocks' told a story and inspired actions back in the workplace. By choosing Escrick Park near York, an outdoor conservation area approximately 40 miles away from World Events head office in the north of England, and sourcing Papakata tents made from natural materials to 'house' the conference we were able to create a sustainable village with a music festival feel that delegates responded to enthusiastically. To minimise carbon emissions coaches collected delegates from pre-arranged locations in West www.theleisurereview.co.uk



Graham Keene: put World Events environmental aspirations to the test

"Our Triple Impact approach means every event we deliver minimises the impact on the environment, delivers a social impact by leaving a legacy with the local community and maximizes the commercial return for the event's stakeholders"

Yorkshire and took them to York, where they registered in the tented village while locally sourced breakfast and lunch were served in recyclable cardboard boxes to delegates on picnic benches outside the tented village. While you can't fatten a pig by weighing it, the corollary is also true: what doesn't get measured doesn't get done. With this in mind we took the view early on in the planning process that we would deliver the event against BS8901, the British standard for sustainable event management. A working party was formed to measure compliance and advise the rest of the event committee on sustainability issues. In addition to the venue, destination, food, beverages and travel, impact on the site and supply chain management were also considered. The key issue in this was to ensure that suppliers were informed of our intention to run the event as sustainably as possible and to encourage them to adopt the same principles.

We wanted to leave a demonstrable legacy from the conference so prior to the event staff were encouraged to donate articles of clothing, non-perishable food items and books, which were collated and delivered to the site in advance. Delegates used the donated clothing, books and food to create a giant replica of the company logo, an exercise which forms the basis of a new corporate social responsibility team-building event we have devised and called 'Rags to Riches'. The donations, over 50 sacks of items, were then split between two local charities with office wear and tins of food going to Carecent, a homeless shelter in York, and the remainder of the clothing and books being donated to Shelter in the city.

Clear objectives were set for each element of the event against the five levels of the Phillips ROI methodology with the conference as a whole evaluated against the highest level. In order to do this an ROI cascade programme designed to evaluate the impact on the business over the 12 months following the event was initiated. One year later the results are very positive with a minimum ROI of 20% having been achieved. The delivery team has also had independent confirmation that the event was delivered in compliance with BS8901. Measured against our own Triple Impact objectives and our aims of being an industry leader and demonstrating best practice to our staff, the conference has been judged a success. Festival 09 fulfilled an important role as a functional training exercise for all staff and allowed them to become immersed in what makes a great event, as well as one that can achieve BS8901.

'Festival 09: our business rocks' was an enjoyable experience on both sides of the reception desk, and even inspirational, but did it work? I think it did. Staff who talk to clients at all levels have become ambassadors for sustainable events, the event was actually the winner of the European Incentive Business Travel Meetings 2009 Awards Sustainable Initiative of the Year award and the fact that the event was delivered for the same budget as the previous year but with 20% more participants helps as well.

Graham Keene is founder and chairman of WorldEvents™ Group, a global company that creates and delivers live international events that communicate impact and provide measurable ROI for its corporate clients and their business messages.

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