

How to Plan a Socially Responsible Meeting :

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Everyone talks about socially responsible meetings and incentives, but how do you put that theory into practice?

It's a question that Dominique Love, founder of Atlanta-based Corporate Community Outsourcing LLC, has been fielding more often in recent months. Love — whose 3-year-old firm consults companies on community-building and corporate giving strategies — expanded her practice this year to include socially responsible meetings.

Many people equate environmentally friendly meetings with socially responsible meetings, but the latter go beyond green, Love explains. She separates socially responsible meetings into four buckets: cash and contributions; awareness; volunteerism; and environmental stewardship.

Regarding cash and contributions, companies might consider earmarking a percentage of the meeting cost for a nonprofit organization. Or they could hold an off-site activity at a local nonprofit venue, such as an old opera house or community garden. "There are great venues where you can have a lovely cocktail party while you're producing revenue for a nonprofit," she says.

Volunteerism is another key component. In lieu of a teambuilding activity, for example, a group could send volunteers to help with a community project, such as cleaning up a park.

Environmental stewardship, Love says, can be as simple as asking housekeepers not to clean the towels every day, turning off lights, and printing agendas on both sides of the paper. On a larger scale, taking meal orders ahead of time can limit the amount of leftovers. "It's a little bit more of an effort, but it's something that can save a lot."

Another way to give back is to donate leftovers — untouched food, pens, printers, papers, flowers, and other items that won't be used again — to local groups. "Think of everything as a resource — your junk is their treasure."

Recycling is growing more common among groups that have the leverage to make it a condition of doing business with the hotel or venue, Love says. The hotel probably won't purchase recycling bins and have a staff person collect recyclable materials. But if companies are requesting it, it might become a priority. "The consumer has got to drive the demand for this," she says. "Money speaks."

Love works with clients to develop and implement strategies. The first step, she says, is getting executive buy-in. "If you can get a couple of people who are champions for the cause, it can filter down." She also helps companies work on internal and external marketing campaigns to get the word out — not only within the meetings industry, but their own industry as well — about what they are doing. Being socially responsible makes for great PR, she says. "More people are sensitive to these issues."