

Green with Envy

Green Meeting Venues are a main draw for today's event planners

By Jamie Parcels

Many Canadian venues have taken responsibility and become leaders in sustainable green meeting planning and implementation. The meeting industry's impact on the environment is so substantial that just a few course corrections are making a considerable difference.

Green meetings reduce environmental impact, leave a positive, lasting impression on the participants, organizers, service providers and community – and they may even cost less.

From eating local, healthy and organic foods to encouraging the use of responsible print materials, planners and venues are working together to ensure today's meetings implement a green strategy.

This strategy is certainly fostered by the Hotel Association of Canada and its Green Key Eco-Rating Program. Officially launched in 1997 through partnerships with Environment Canada and Natural Resources Canada, the program is a graduated rating system designed to recognize hotels, motels and resorts that are committed to improving their environmental and fiscal performances.

Based on the results of a comprehensive environmental self assessment, hoteliers are awarded a 1-5 Green Key rating and provided with the guidance on how to “unlock” opportunities to reduce environmental impacts and operating costs through reduced utility consumption, employee training and supply chain management.

Today, there are approximately 3,000 hotels of all sizes participating in the program in 30 countries. Program members include Canada's largest hotel – the Delta Chelsea with 1,600 rooms – to those with as few as 25 rooms...and membership does have its benefits.

“We have gotten some large pieces of business because we are Green Key Certified,” says Todd Jeannotte, director of catering and conference services, Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver, who is quick to identify the balance that exists between being a high-end hotel and adhering to environmental responsibility. “We are the luxury end of the hotel business and therefore not always associated with green – ironically. We are a consumptive environment and do provide a luxury good. For this reason, I think a lot of people were surprised that we have the luxury, but we are still able to achieve green.”

Jeannotte suggests that the Green Key can be used as much more than a simple rating system, but rather as a guide for continuous improvements. “Any hotel that has a 5-Green Key is still going to have areas that it did not hit in the audit, so those represent future goals. The Green Key has enabled us to identify things that we still need to do,” he says.

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Last January, the Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver, featuring 372 guestrooms and 26,000 square feet of meeting space, was awarded a 5-Green Key rating. but Jeannotte asserts that the hotel has been promoting green initiatives for some time. “The Green Key Program has also assisted us to both qualify and quantify what we are doing,” he says, adding that as much as 30 per cent of the meeting business that comes to the hotel is predicated on its green initiatives. The Four Season Hotel Vancouver also holds the distinction of being Green Table Certified venue – a local initiative set to go national that focuses on food and beverage, menu options, power usage and purchasing policies.

Corporations look for green because it is has become part of their branding and associations values are an aggregate of individual member concerns, so “green” has become common in many RFPs under the section on environmental practices. Today, many people are becoming green at home and this is being reflected in both their workplace and in the events that they choose, and industry, meeting planner and venues have taken note.

“Meeting planners are asking venues, what is your Green Key Rating,” asserts Anthony Pollard, president of the Hotel Association of Canada. “Even with the downturn in the economy, the Green Key Rating never slipped off the radar in terms of being an important thing to look for.”

Acknowledging the overall size and economic impact of the Canadian meetings industry, the Green Key Meetings Program was launched by the Hotel Association of Canada and MPI Foundation Canada as a joint initiative designed to expand on the meetings and conventions component of the original Green Key Eco-Rating Program. The program serves as an assessment tool for hotel and resort properties that host meeting of any size. The assessment provides travel, meeting and conferences planners with the hotels level of commitment to environment issues. The program is about sustainable meeting operations, adding value to the bottom line through conservation and brand management, and positively influencing the supply chain of relationships.

And the anticipate response to the program is favourable. “All of the properties that are currently green key that have meeting and convention facilities will want to be part of it,” asserts Pollard. “The program is being picked up in the US and we haven’t officially launched. The growth will be exponential.” Seventy-five hotels are currently signed up for the program.

In terms of “green,” there is no denying the change in the supply chain. When “green” first began, many products were cost prohibitive and in limited supply, suggests industry experts. Today, the availability of product that can be purchased at reasonable rates is indicative of the fact that supplier change has coincided with the change in buying habits.

Tickled pink by going green

Canadian venues are finding interesting ways to become environmentally responsible. John Paul Adamo, president and general manager of Hockley Valley Resort, a hotel, golf and ski destination located one hour from downtown Toronto says Canadian venues can learn much from what is being done in regards to green initiatives in other parts of the world.

“What we are doing here in terms of green goes along with my culinary training,” he says. “Being able to walk 100 yards to a two-acre garden is a chef’s dream. Are we reducing our carbon footprint by not shipping in produce from Mexico? Absolutely, but it has more to do with the quality of the food that aligns with what Europeans have done for years: buy what you need for a day in bulk. We are seeing a payback and our customers are appreciating what we are doing for sure.”

Budgeting red to go green?

There is a cost associated with going green, especially over the last two years where companies are cutting costs and saving money. At Hockley Valley resort, all of the products in house (forks, cups, straws, etc.) are biodegradable and cost more and, in the absence of being able to pass this cost onto the customer, the resort’s proximity to local food helps maintain a healthy bottom line and remains inline with the organization’s philosophy as it relates to green. “Creativity and proximity are two things that really help with green initiatives, but it does take a lot of energy. Having asparagus coming from Mexico does not fit in with our philosophy. Having it come from a local farm does and is inline with our initiatives,” says Adamo.

Adamo agrees that today’s meeting planners are coming to expect green as part of the overall service offerings. “The dialogue has changed from do you have a green program to what are your green initiatives and are they enough,” he asserts. “With the change in dialogue, you have to be aware of what the expectation is from the meeting planner – they are working towards green at their level and they expect the venues to be doing it as well.”

Adamo adds that meeting planners are also becoming more discerning and are no longer satisfied with the green “buzzwords” that were once commonplace in the Canadian meetings industry. “The phrase ‘We buy local’ is thrown out there so easily and today’s meeting planners don’t want lip service – they want tangibles and we provide it to them,” he says, referencing the resorts composting program, biodegradable packaging and local purchasing policy. “In terms of green, visitors to our facility are seeing it at every level, adding that Hockley is currently in the midst of negotiating solar technology which will include the installation of solar and wind turbine rooftops.

Some hoteliers, like Greg Solloum, CEO of the Best Western Plus Hotel & Suites in Kelowna, have been investing in sustainable practices long before the concept of “green” was in vogue and long before the inherent economic benefits of going “green” were realized.

“When I started at the hotel in 1990, I came from an environmental science background and that enabled me to look at the hotel with a fresh set of eyes,” he asserts. “I knew that as responsible stewards of the planet, we had to make changes that were right for the planet, first and foremost.”

To date, the facility has earned the distinction of carrying the moniker as “Kelowna’s Green Hotel,” having put into place several green initiatives including, but not limited to, the installation of an advanced solar hybrid water heating system, one of the largest in Canada, in 2002. This system is designed to prevent 90 tones per year of greenhouse gases that would have otherwise gone into the atmosphere from burning natural gas.

With its initiatives to reduce the hotels carbon footprint and ensure the continued health of British Columbia’s natural environment, the hotel has received numerous awards including those from the Minister of State for Climate Action and, in 2010, the SIFE Okanagan Eco-nomics Award, a distinction bestowed on the “Kelowna Sustainability Leader of the Year” and presented by the Students in Free Enterprise Okanagan. The Best Western Plus is a 4 Green Key Certified hotel and, according to Solloum, the hotel is working towards a 5 Green Key certification and is pursuing the Green Key Meetings Program.

“Green does serve as a competitive advantage in the industry but, more important, it is extremely important for the planet. Everybody needs to get on the bus and we can’t get there soon enough,” says Solloum, adding that meeting planners play a crucial role in promoting green meetings.

“I see green meetings driving the push to green hotels. Meeting planners can be publicizing the fact that they have chosen a hotel over another because of its green initiatives,” he says. “This type of publicity helps all of us and it is better and more effective than self promotion ”

Is it easy being green?

There are some areas in the Green Key audit that require financial investment and some smaller/older facilities may not have the corporate infrastructure to meet the criterion as they relate to codes and upgrades, and those can be challenging.

But in times of tighter budgets, industry experts suggest that a lot of smaller organizations are unable to take advantage of the abundant amount of information out there because they simply don’t have the time to inquire about the options available to them. “If they would take the time to look, they would discover that they, too, can afford to go green,” says Grace Vale, professional meeting planner and owner of Venues.ca. “Today, many meeting organizers are being asked to do more with less, so they simply don’t have the time to research the options available to them. Often, smaller organizations are afraid of change. It really isn’t a question of unfair advantage.”

Hit the reset button. It's the green one on the "right"

With the economic downturn in 2008, the industry is slowly turning around and, as a result of technology, conferences have become shorter and more intense, and associations and corporations are saving money by going green.

"Websites and online registration is big, but many associations do not have a custom software program for their conferences, so they often purchase a program and the costs of technology are inline with what they can afford. This has improved efficiency so much that they are looking to outsource that aspect of the conference," says Vale.

Vale suggest that clients are no longer satisfied with many of the pre-recession catch phrases like "carbon neutral" that were commonplace in the industry, and are in fact more responsive to learning how individual parts of a meeting are reducing their footprint in the areas of printing, food, lighting, etc. "The notion of carbon neutral/ carbon reduced with respect to transportation has been a failure for the meetings industry. People will invariably still take the most convenient form of transportation. This phraseology has not worked for the green meeting business," she says.

She continues, "Before the recession, it was big to put this definition on you – how much carbon you are using, how to reduce, reuse and replace. I believe this thinking has gone to the wayside. Today's clients are targeting specific areas for reduction in all events that they are doing – this resonates more with them.

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Sidebar

The Green Key Eco-Rating Program

The program addresses the five main operational areas of a property and covers nine areas of sustainable practices:

Operational Areas

- Corporate Environmental Management
- Housekeeping
- Food and Beverage Operations
- Conference & Meeting Facilities
- Engineering

Sustainable Practices

- Energy conservation
- Water conservation
- Solid waste management
- Hazardous waste management
- Indoor air quality
- Community outreach
- Building infrastructure
- Land use
- Environmental management

Pull quote,

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- Todd Jeannotte, director of catering and conference services, Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver