

# Eco-friendly conferences and events: your complete guide

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## **Ever wondered how to make your events more sustainable?**

You're not alone. Green events are a key trend for this year, but they're destined to become the standard. In an era where everyone can see the direct consequences on a global scale, every event will be scrutinised.

If that sounds daunting, don't worry. This ebook will guide you through the five key areas you need to consider. You'll find simple, practical advice for every kind of event, from conferences that attract a huge international audience to a simple office meeting. At the end of each sub-section, there's a quick-read 'what to do' takeaway, to help you refer back to the key points.

Let's start with the essential first question: why?



## Why it matters

First: for all the same reasons you recycle your waste paper, put your food scraps in a compost bin, and bring your lunch to work in a reusable container.

(Don't do all of those? It's time to start.)

From offsetting your carbon footprint when you fly to turning the light off when you leave a room, we're all accustomed to making small adjustments to daily life. Climate change isn't a myth. Natural resources are finite. At the current rate of production, by 2050 there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish.

If that all sounds a little too fluffy for you, you'll like the second reason more: because it's good business practice. Your audience cares about sustainability, some of them with deep conviction. Show them you've placed sustainable practices front and centre at your event, and it will be noticed, enhancing your brand, building your reputation, and proving that corporate social responsibility is something you take seriously.

Fail to mention it, and, increasingly, that will be noticed too. Attendees have high expectations, especially those who regularly attend events and travel globally. They've seen it can be done.

Best of all, as infrastructures change in line with our priorities, making green choices gets easier and cheaper all the time.

Make your event sustainable, and it needn't cost the earth.

## Choose your metrics

You know what sustainable practice means. Being green. Recycling. Eco-friendly products. All-natural.

But what does it actually look like in the real world of an event planner?

It's easy to make small changes in our personal lives; planning an event means looking at the bigger picture.

Air quality. Waste management. Water conservation. Energy efficiency. To be genuinely committed to sustainable practice, you need to acknowledge the broader impact.

According to [MeetGreen's](#) research, the average conference attendee produces over 170 kilograms of CO2 emissions per day. A three-day conference for 1000 people creates 5670 kilograms of waste, over half of which will go directly to landfill.

That doesn't mean small changes are redundant. But they need to be applied strategically, and with sufficient knowledge of the hidden impact of some green-looking solutions – as you'll see in Part 4.

So where do you start?

Right here, with the first of these 6 essential steps to making your event sustainable.

# 1: Start with the setting

Venue choice is the #1 way you can reduce your event's environmental impact.





## Location

Travel to and from your event is the single biggest contributor to your event's carbon footprint.

Large events like international conferences and big trade shows attract a global audience: that's part of their purpose. But air travel can be responsible for up to 70% of the emissions produced. When you're relying on individuals to offset this cost, it becomes harder for you to claim you're creating a truly eco-friendly event.

Car travel can also have a significant impact, especially when attendees make their ways to business events solo.

When you're choosing a venue, consider what options are available for public transport: if there's a convenient rail station with good links across the area, you're on the right track. Better yet, offer incentives to use public transport or offset your carbon: earlybird-equivalent ticket reductions, room upgrades, increased posterboard space or the best tables at the gala dinner all have value to the customer without necessarily being tough for your budget.

Environmental concerns have seen a rise in virtual conference tickets, too. If you can offer a low-price ticket which offers virtual booths, panel streaming and chat options, you reduce the need for some of your guests to fly at all. In doing so, you don't only avoid the emissions produced by a flight; you also cut their on-site waste production and the energy usage of an overnight stay.

**What to do:** choose a location with great public transport links, and incentivise these options. For events with a big international audience, offer virtual tickets to boost attendance without incurring heavy carbon emissions.

## Venue management

The venue you choose shouldn't only be in the right place. It should have the right eco-friendly credentials, too.

Look for venues that have a clearly-stated environmental policy. On a show-round, look for the key signs of a venue that views sustainability as integral: waste recycling bins, water fountains and eco cups are all good signs.

Don't be afraid to ask questions of your venue. What is their waste management system? How much waste do they send to landfill annually? Do they use Fairtrade-certified tea and coffee? What water-saving systems do they use? Is their energy from a green supplier?

If they can offer in-house services, take them: using an on-site AV team instead of one that needs to transport vanloads of equipment for a long distance saves on emissions – and they're more likely to have an established waste management protocol for any disposables.

**What to do:** select a venue that already supports sustainable practices, and will work with you to minimise your impact.

## 2: Food and drink

When it comes to event waste, food can be a big problem. Sustainability specialist Shawna McKinley notes that a minimum of 20% of event waste is likely to be food – and it can be up to 60%.





## The right supplier

Your choice of caterer shouldn't just be down to who offers the tastiest food, tempting as that might be.

Choose a catering specialist with a clear strategy to reduce food waste. Ask where it goes: if it's into landfill, that's a default no. Leftovers from the event should join kitchen scraps in a direct composting solution – or better yet, be donated to charity. To make this happen needs a little creativity: many foods will need to be refrigerated for a set period, and will spoil by the end of the event, so if you're hoping to donate leftovers ask your caterers about the best choices.

The right supplier will also help minimise food-related waste, like disposable flatware and cutlery. Make sure they can offer you service from reusable items. If they offer biodegradable alternatives, make sure they have a system in place for ensuring these are recycled correctly; biodegradable items need special conditions to break down, and often end up in landfill as a consequence.

If your supplier is providing staff, make sure they all know of your commitment to sustainability, and are briefed appropriately.

Depending on the nature of your event, you might even like to involve your guests by providing food waste bins.

**What to do:** ask questions about food waste management and other food-related waste before you settle on a catering supplier.

## How not to overorder

Food waste from events doesn't have to be inevitable.

Over-ordering is a common problem: no one wants their event to run out of food. Minimise excess with careful planning. Do you or your caterer and venue have a record of past events? Use this expertise to keep control.

Keep an eye on serving size, and choose realistic, sensible portioning.

Plan to include plenty of vegetarian and vegan content on your menu. Aside from being what guests want, it's also a way to reduce energy use, since meat products take more resources to create than vegetables.

Long term, use every event you plan as an opportunity to refine your approach. Keep a record of what is left over: how much, and what it is.

**What to do:** call on experts to ensure your menu planning doesn't get out of control.



## Ethical coffee breaks

Coffee breaks are an integral part of conferences and meetings. It's where the networking really takes place, and will be offered as part of most event packages as standard.

Fairly-traded tea and coffee isn't only financially ethical; it also comes from sustainable sources. Make that your first question.

Second, ask how the waste will be disposed of. Coffee grounds can be recycled into biofuels like coffee logs; most teabags are compostable. If you're serving hot water and letting guests make the drinks themselves, avoid single-serving packages: a large pot of instant coffee, unwrapped teabags of various flavours and a jug of milk reduce the potential for waste significantly. Tell your guests why, too; it helps them feel engaged and involved in making positive choices.

Going disposable-cup-free as an event makes a bold statement, and it's not hard to achieve, either. Offer a reusable eco cup made from a sustainable material like bamboo or rice husk, either as part of your goodie bag or available for sale. Encourage guests to carry them throughout the event as well as using long-lasting crockery.

Your choice of snack makes a difference too. Avoid biscuits in small plastic packets; opt for large platters with bulk-baked pastries and cookies, and fresh fruit. They'll also be tastier and healthier.

**What to do:** have high expectations of suppliers and guests, and make your coffee breaks stand out for their green credentials.

# 3: Think before you print

Print may seem an area that's easy to get right, with recycled materials that can be easily be recycled back into the system. But event printing often produces a lot more waste than you might realise.



## Keep it generic

A significant amount of your print material can and should be on recycled paper or card, using vegetable-based inks and dyes, and supplied by a local supplier to keep delivery emissions low.

However, some of your collateral and display materials may not be so easy to make green.

Vinyls and adhesive stickers are rarely recyclable; those that are rarely actually make their way into the right kind of recycling to actually avoid landfill. Signage is often created with a polystyrene or foam core, and held in place with plastic zip ties – none of which can be recycled.

A little creativity will find you a reusable solution. Instead of foamex or vinyls, print your signage on recycled paper, placed into a reusable frame or A board.

When that's not practical, a little forethought when it comes to design will lessen the negative environmental impact. Make the content and message generic, and these items can be reused for multiple events. The same is true for lanyards and plastic cases for name badges. These are often discarded at the end of an event – but could be returned and reused with a little careful direction.

Just make sure you have a clear arrangement with all staff and your venue, to ensure items don't find their way into landfill.

**What to do:** reuse display materials wherever possible, especially those that can't be recycled, by avoiding date stamps and other time-specific imagery and language.

## Skip the fancy finish

Recycled paper and card is easy to find, and now so well-used it's unlikely to cause you budget issues. It's even possible to get a high quality finish from supplier – though you may prefer to show off your green credentials with the matt, 'rustic' quality of undyed stock.

Don't be caught out by the temptations of special finishes like foiling or spot UV, however. While these commonplace design flourishes make your work eye-catching, it also renders it impossible to recycle – so your ultra-green brochure, invitation or abstract book is destined for landfill.

**What to do:** for effects on card and paper, use debossing or embossing instead, which simply lifts or lowers words or sections without adding any new materials.

# 4: Genuine change, not lip service

Unfortunately, good intentions aren't always enough.

Some of our most well-meaning efforts to be green aren't actually as eco-friendly as we think. Here are a few false turns to be wary of when planning your events.





## The right dairy alternatives

It's important to offer a range of options for different dietary needs in any case. Add in the negative environmental impact of dairy farming, and an alternative to dairy milk is definitely worth having.

Be mindful of your choices, however. Almond milk is a popular substitute: so much so that Californian farmers have changed use of vast areas of their land to cope with demand. Almonds are a water-hungry crop, however, and in a drought area the negative environmental impact is profound.

**What to do:** choose a lower-impact alternative, like oat milk.

## Brand and reuse

As we all grow more aware of the disposable plastic problem, it's commonplace to use alternatives.

As an event manager, this seems like an easy benefit. Branded bottles are a low-cost way to provide your attendees with swag that has a genuine long-term use. Give your guests a water bottle they'll use every day, and you know your message will stay present.

Although your supplier may promise that a plastic bottle will be recyclable, in reality many types of plastic are only recyclable by very specific waste-management facilities. This is especially the case for brightly-coloured opaque PET. While a reusable water bottle is better than single-use disposables, there are other alternatives with lower impact.

**What to do:** when choosing swag to offer, pick a reusable cup made from a sustainable material, like bamboo or, better still, rice husk. Alternatively, source a recycled plastic bottle which is BPA and phthalate-free.

## Be packaging-savvy

Ordering print stock from a local supplier, using low-impact materials? Excellent.

But when it arrives shrink-wrapped into individual bundles, you've added non-recyclable plastic waste. Boxes filled with polystyrene packing peanuts have the same problem.

There are alternatives, like wrapping items in paper belly bands or using recycled paper padding. Ask around until you find a supplier that will meet these needs; there may be a small additional cost involved but it will save your from adding to landfill.

# 5: Create local partnerships

However passionate you are about making your events more eco-friendly, you can't do it alone. Fortunately, you don't have to.



## Use your location

Increasingly, cities and areas are committing to large-scale sustainability planning and climate action plans. They will be in the process of beginning to establish the kind of infrastructure you need to create genuinely, meaningfully eco-friendly events.

Your local area will have a Strategic Economic Plan to attract development to the area. Working within that framework will be destination marketing organisations, keen to promote local business.

Ask them what they're doing to support eco-friendly ventures, and how they can help you.

## Keep it local

Travel for your guests creates extensive carbon emissions and fuel use – and the same is true of your suppliers.

You may find an excellent supplier of low-cost bamboo lanyards, but if they're based in China, your delivery of 2500 comes with a hefty emissions price tag.

Food suppliers in particular should be as local as possible. That way you're minimising time on the road for high-energy refrigerated transports, and reducing the food miles of your catering. You're also more likely to find a supplier with a simple supply chain which supports other local producers, and connects easily to waste management infrastructure.

# Resources

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[www.socialtables.com/blog/meeting-event-design/eco-friendly-events/](http://www.socialtables.com/blog/meeting-event-design/eco-friendly-events/)

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