By Meegan Jones

Knowing What You Don't Know

Do you know what you don't know? No? So how do you find out what you need know, and once you know that, how will you know what to do, and how to do it? Who will tell you what you didn't know you didn't know? And who wants to know anyway?

You may have pondered such questions recently with events sustainability in mind. Lifting your gaze momentarily from programming schedules, spreadsheet wrangling, CAD drawings, creative briefings, risk assessments and marketing strategies, you may have had a moment to think about this sustainability thing.

What is it? How does it apply to you? How do you get started?

First is to begin with the end in mind. If you're committing to improved sustainability performance, firstly work out what you'll be reporting on. Remember to consider what will be of interest to those who'll be reading your sustainability report. (Be they the boss, owner, client, staff, contractors, audience, community, or regulatory authorities).

You'll need to enlighten yourself of all the topics within the sustainability spectrum to identify your issues and understand what you may need to manage. Use the Global Reporting Initiative's Event Organizer Sector Supplement as a guide to all the things you may need to consider when managing and reporting sustainability issues and performance.

Sustainability is far more than recycling, greenhouse gas emissions and water bottles. So what else could be considered? The three tenants of sustainability; environmental, social and economic, are overarching headings for a massive list of potential issues, topics, and impacts. Don't forget issues can be positive too. The socio-economic benefits an event can leave in legacy make up a vital part of its sustainability performance.

Apart from the obvious and popular environmental sustainability issues such as waste, transport, water and energy, other topics which fall under the sustainability banner can include accessibility, complaints, diversity, labour, human rights, discrimination, corruption, safety, air quality, toxicity, resource consumption, animal welfare, biodiversity, protection of waterways, indigenous rights, local revenues, financial support, donation of equipment, knowledge sharing, creation of jobs, tourism benefits etc.

Continuing Professional Development

A new skillset is needed by our industry's professionals to be able to competently identify sustainability issues and then to take action to effectively manage those issues and improve the event's sustainability performance.

There are many checklists, calculators, management systems, and guidebooks for you to access. Some are listed at the bottom of this article. If the DIY route to a skills top-up is not right for you, then taking a purpose-designed course in events sustainability may be the way to go. Ensure the course you choose to take is right for you and that trainers have practical at-event sustainability experience to be able to answer your curly questions and have a toolbox full of practical tried and tested solutions.

The key is to learn about sustainability so you know what you're looking for when trying to identify and manage your event's sustainability issues. Taking a short professional development course may be the solution. Alternatively an online self-paced course, or your own journey of sustainability training through the many DIY resources may be right for you.

Once you know what you didn't know you didn't know, you'll be ready to track through your event and identify the sustainability issues relevant for you. Prioritizing the issues you uncover will be necessary, as you can't do everything at once. Do this by assessing how important each issue is to event stakeholders, as well as considering the scale and regularity of the issue and its impact. Also consider bang for your buck. How much effort (time, money, resources) is required to gain what level of likely improvement?

Don't forget to start at the end. Think of an outside person writing a sustainability report on your event. What would they look for, what would they write about and who would read the report? Once you've worked that out, you will be well on your way to devising an authentic list of potential sustainability issues. With a sustainability skills update, you'll be ready to rock n' roll and manage those issues to perfection.

Links to Learning Resources:

Global Reporting Initiative's Event Organizer Sector Supplement
www.globalreporting.org/ReportingFramework/SectorSupplements/Events/

Events Sustainability Practitioners (LinkedIn Group)
www.linkedin.com

Sustainable Event Alliance
www.sustainable-event-alliance.com

Julies Bicycle
www.juliesbicycle.com

Positive Impact Events (training)
www.positiveimpactevents.co.uk

Sustainable Events Training
www.sustainable-event-training.com

Sustainable Event Management: A Practical Guide
www.thegreeneventguide.com

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