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The Green Question

Sure, global warming is a hot topic, and some high-profile events are touting their eco-friendly elements. But how many hosts are paying attention to the ecological effects of gatherings that don't have a green theme? And how much does all this earth-friendly stuff cost, anyway? Here's a look at how environmental awareness is really affecting corporate events.

Heather Henderson has set an ambitious goal. As the operations manager for Cisco Systems' "Networkers at Cisco Live," a 10,000-head annual user conference, Henderson already has plenty on her plate: The conference packs in roughly 500 educational sessions, a trio of networking and entertainment evenings, and a trade show with more than 150 exhibitors. That's not stopping her, though, from forging ahead with a plan to make nearly every aspect of the conference—from paper to electricity to food—environmentally friendly by 2009.

"This year, we're moving to be more green," she says of Cisco's five-day program, which the network equipment manufacturer holds in a different city each summer. "We're taking small steps." Some of those steps include working with the caterer to provide biodegradable plates and utensils and saving paper by printing handouts only when users request them—and, in those cases, printing on recycled paper with soy inks.

"It's a pretty aggressive undertaking," she says, acknowledging that although awareness of eco-friendliness is up, many meeting and event pros aren't yet making the leap from awareness to action. "People are changing their behavior to some extent, but not to the extent it needs to be to make a huge impact."

There are certainly lots of events showing off their eco-mindedness. At the Environmental Media Association's Los Angeles [award gala](#) in November, vice president Patie Maloney ordered an all-organic menu and set up a special arrival lane for hybrid vehicles. To promote its March issue (which had an earth-friendly theme), *Domino* staged a [shopping event](#) in New York featuring environmentally friendly products, where design firm [Aparat](#) fashioned curtains and other decor out of recycled brown craft paper, which had been printed with the shelter magazine's logo using plant-based inks. At the Washington premiere of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*—the media catalyst that brought awareness of global warming to a mass audience—guests quaffed organic wines, and decor consisted almost entirely of sustainably grown flowers. Even this year's [Academy Awards](#), always a display of excess, touted green initiatives and organic food.

Despite these examples, however, environmentally friendly events are still a novelty. Many take place when the group or gathering has a specifically green agenda. Some hosts stage events with a green theme—picture hemp tablecloths and catering trays made of sticks or unvarnished wood—and then go back to their normal ways, with no further thought about the impact large gatherings have on the environment.

Making everyday product launches, award ceremonies, sales meetings, and the like environmentally friendly just

isn't a top priority for many event specialists. When we called planners at companies as diverse as Absolut Spirits, Prudential Financial, Xerox Canada Ltd., and Washington Mutual bank, we got surprisingly similar responses: They talk about going green, and they recycle, but they haven't done much more to reduce the negative effects their events and meetings have on the environment. "Though our company is ecologically friendly, I can't say that we do anything special right now in our sales events [or] meetings," says Marie Schlump, a planner at Prudential Financial.

Why the disconnect? It's not that this community isn't aware of its impact on the earth; it's just that too often, going green is presented as a single all-or-nothing task, a characterization that gets it shoved to the bottom of to-do lists. Some advocates for green events theorize that a lack of reasonably priced, eco-friendly products is to blame; others say that there aren't yet enough suppliers getting on the green bandwagon to offer alternatives and deliver them at prices corporations are willing to pay.

"Most of the time, it is strictly dollars and cents. Green, many times, is more expensive," says Kevin White, director of production at [Empire Force Events](#), whose clients often turn down his suggestions to use green alternatives because of the cost. "People are just focused on financials. That's really where we're at with this."

"Most industries are about the bottom line and turning a profit, and I think that really prohibits people from making a step toward green," says Barbara Kramer, co-producer of *Designers & Agents*, a series of shows for the fashion and retail industry. Kramer is in the minority when it comes to eco-friendly products and services; she's willing to spend more and do the extra legwork for elements like biodegradable tableware. She's adding recycling bins at her shows in New York and Los Angeles this year, and she uses all-natural Method cleaning supplies, even though it means purchasing them at retail stores—and retail prices.

Regardless of price, sometimes the eco-friendly choice just isn't realistic, or it works against an event's purpose. Telling V.I.P.s to take public transit to a party might be greener than sending town cars to pick them up, but it's not going to provide the feeling of luxury and pampering the host intends.

Certainly, there's a middle ground between virtuousness and practicality. The problem is, that green comfort zone is going to be different for every planner, every group, and, in some cases, every event. Maybe you can get away with using recycled paper napkins and rustic greenery at a casual lunch, but not for a black-tie award banquet. Or maybe you can swing the organic baby greens, but not the pricey free-range, grass-fed lamb chops. And those V.I.P.s waiting to get picked up rather than use mass transit? You could send a hybrid car.

Part of the eco-exploration process is finding stylish options that don't look like cutbacks or political statements. "I think there's still somewhat of a perceived notion of that crunchy granola [look] as the norm, but that's been shifting more," says Mara Engel, cofounder of [OrganicWorks Marketing](#), an event marketing company with an environmental focus. While she does have some clients who view this as an aesthetic choice, more are learning that an ecologically friendly event doesn't have to look a certain way or have an environmental agenda. "They're receptive if there's an alternative that doesn't compromise their budget or their look," Engel says.

Going green also doesn't have to mean reconceiving every single element of an event. "The whole eco movement we're seeing now isn't about tossing everything you've done aside, because that would be wasteful," says Corrin Arasa, president of [Events East/E2](#), producer of the Project GreenHouse event at the Sundance Film Festival, designed to showcase luxury green products.

"To be totally frank, it's not black or white. It's absolutely a continuum," says Danielle Venokur, owner of environmentally focused event production firm [dvGreen](#). "In the end, it's an event, and waste is going to come out of it. The goal is minimizing that and making smart choices."

To help you make those decisions, we have [a roster of tips and tactics](#) to make events more earth-friendly. We've consulted with environmental specialists and professional planners to find out not only how the following actions impact the earth, but also—because these may be the deciding factors—how much they cost and how much time and effort they require to implement. The rest is up to you. —*Martha C. White*

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