

Admit It: The Events Industry Is Missing the Mark on Sustainability

Let's move beyond simple checklists, one-time social initiatives, and basic measurements of landfill avoidance and recycling, and start thinking more systemically and longer term.

By Paul Salinger and Chance Thompson

When it comes to sustainability, we all know the event industry's problems and we can boil them down to just a few phrases: Too much carbon emitted. Wasteful consumption patterns. Unequal, non-diverse supply chains. We've long restated the problem at conferences, online, and in print. Is it time to admit that we are failing at being a sustainable industry and need to come up with an actual solution?

We've spent the last 20 years (at least) talking about green meetings and sustainability. Progress hasn't been enough. We need to leave behind our current "take-make-waste" event economy for a more regenerative approach: one that restores, renews, and heals, leaving host communities, attendees, nature, and society better off than we found them.

That approach is known as "circularity." If yesterday's mantra was "reduce, reuse, recycle," then today's must be "reduce, reuse, remanufacture, repair."

Circularity is based on three principles:

- Design out waste and pollution
- Keep products and materials in use
- Regenerate natural systems

Why should we focus on circularity, and why now? The answers boil down to a critically important and inconvenient truth: We have run the global economy of the last few centuries based largely on degenerative systems—that is, systems that produce short-term and medium-term benefits, but degrade nature and society in the long run. "Business as usual" has come at a huge cost, reflected in the megatrends the world is currently facing: rising global temperatures; increased emissions of greenhouse gases; increased loss of wildlife and habitats; oceans becoming more acidic, decreased fish supplies, and increased plastic pollution; loss of soil quality and food waste globally; and rising inequality.

The event and hospitality industry is not immune from these trends and has, in many cases, contributed negatively to them.

The New Blueprint

Events of any size can start following circularity principles, no matter how far along the sustainability journey they are. Think of circularity as a type of sustainability, a type that seeks not simply to sustain but also to restore, renew, and nurture.

One useful way to think about circularity is to consider the potential positive impacts that events can have in six areas:

Human capital by creating jobs, satisfying employees, improving people's health, and creating new knowledge, skills, and motivation.

Social capital by stimulating innovation, collaboration, and the development of thriving and inclusive communities, businesses, labor forces and unions, schools, and volunteer organizations.

Financial capital by generating incomes, creating shareholder value, strengthening competitiveness, and building business resilience.

Natural capital by helping to protect, restore, and regenerate ecosystems and services within all the communities of an event destination.

Intellectual capital by collaborating and engaging all stakeholders in the event process in an inclusive and equitable process.

Manufactured capital by partnering with industry stakeholders and providing products used at events that create positive social impact and contribute to circular principles.

If your event team is thinking of making changes to its business or procurement models, think about changes that result in circularity as well as the vitality of those six capitals areas. Consider all the stakeholders that will be touched in the process and whether restoration, renewal, and/or resilience will feature prominently in your outcomes.

The three principles of circularity can be applied to most areas of event sustainability, by designing out waste, keep material in flow, and regenerating natural systems (with carbon reduction, offsetting, and capture all being in play for events). The principles can also be applied to human resources, diversity, and ethical supply-chain management. While one part of sustainability is thought of in terms of diverse representation, we need to do a better job of building sustainable relationships. It's one thing to have diversity to balance a panel discussion, but another thing to establish supply-chain and event partnerships that are diverse.

Goals and Actions

We have to push harder toward event circularity, thinking about long-term actions that grow stronger over time.

To do this, the *entire* events industry—from organizers, destinations, venues, and general contractors, to audiovisual, signage, and transportation providers—should agree on goals and begin to take action.

Here are some suggestions for goals that will make an impact:

- Reduce carbon emissions by 45 percent from 2010 levels by 2030, and to net zero by 2050. This is in line with the 2016 Paris Agreement.
- Commit to keeping 90 percent of all materials produced out of landfills by 2030.
- Eliminate the use of single-use plastics by 2030.

How do we get there? It will take great ideas and innovative partnerships to achieve all of this. As a starting point, here are some simple examples:

Circular Supply

Traditional materials can be replaced by bio-based, renewable, or recovered materials. One example: Buy lanyards and badges made from recycled plastic or bamboo. With the right design and materials, these items could also be reused at subsequent events.

Sharing Platforms

Creative collaborations could allow sharing between event organizers. For example, for multiple groups using the same venue in consecutive weeks, audiovisual equipment could be shared to lessen the carbon emission from transport.

Recovery and Upcycling

Find ways to recycle event waste into secondary raw materials (e.g., convert food waste into bio-gas to fuel electricity production) or new materials (e.g., upcycle signage materials into attendee bags).

Product as a Service

Lease or rent meeting products rather than purchase them (for example, modular exhibition stands). To take this to another level of circularity, use stands that are produced using recovered or recycled materials.

Product-Life Extension

Rather than going into the waste stream, can event products and materials be collected, repaired, refurbished, and reused? Event furniture and staging are areas where this could work.

Starting to think bigger and more long-term might require some different partnerships. Here are a few examples:

Rethinking Carbon and Waste

In Britain, where there are many cultural initiatives to combat the climate crisis, Opera North in Leeds has been working to reduce its carbon footprint since 2018. It now manages waste through a local company that drives lower-emission trucks, and it eliminated the use of natural gas in its new restaurant space. In February, the theater presented its second set created entirely out of recycled or repurposed materials, in a production of Handel's "Alcina."

Could you partner with a trucking company to transport goods in low-emission vehicles or produce your event stage using repurposed, rather than virgin, materials?

Plastics and Packaging

Throwaway/single-use plastic is widely seen as one of the world's biggest environmental hazards. It pollutes as it is produced through the extraction of fossil fuels and, no sooner than it is used, it pollutes again. Imagine if the event sector were to use the leverage of procurement departments to demand that promotional products and other goods purchased come with sustainable packaging.

Anaerobic Digesters

[Bubbly Dynamics](#) converted a former meatpacking facility into a hub for local food businesses, with plans for a "mechanical stomach" to turn organic waste into compost, bio-gas, and a

nutrient-rich liquid in which to grow algae. The digester is expected to help fight climate change by feeding a rapidly growing urban population with food grown locally using a closed-loop system that creates little to no waste.

Now, imagine if convention centers or other large venues partnered with a local company to create a local food business that could serve the needs of their clientele and be able to feed any food waste back into the closed-loop system. To foster diversity and equity, the partnerships could be with local minority or women-owned businesses.

Sustainable Aviation Fuel

Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) is the only viable way to reduce aviation emissions significantly in the short to medium term. Made from renewable sources such as used cooking oil, municipal waste, and woody biomass, SAF is a safe, proven fuel with the potential to reduce lifecycle emissions by up to 80 percent compared to conventional aviation fuel. SAF can be blended with conventional jet fuel and, in fact, the EU Commission recently passed a requirement that a percentage of SAF be included with every aircraft fueling at EU airports starting in 2025.

SAF production is still its early days, but leading companies are partnering with Shell Aviation and other suppliers to invest in SAF production as a way to offset or draw down the vast amounts of carbon generated by events and business travel. Can your organization work in that direction?

Clearly, there is much more to be explored as organizations move to more circular, regenerative event processes. For all of us, the time to start is now.

More Resources

Here are some resources to explore, which contributed information to this article:

Circular economy

<https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/>

Regenerative events

https://www.imexexhibitions.com/the-regenerative-revolution?utm_source=group_website&utm_medium=press_release&utm_campaign=nature_report_1

Building a regenerative business

https://sustainablebrands.com/conferences/sustainablebrands/how-to-define-and-build-a-regenerative-business/?utm_source=eventupdates&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=eu_210331

(download report from this link)

Circular partnerships

<https://mudjeans.eu/blogs/news/circularity-partnerships>

Sustainable operas

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/10/arts/music/opera-sustainability.html>

Circular food economy

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/climate/circular-food-economy-sustainable.html>

Single-use plastics

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/climate/single-use-plastic.html>

Sustainable aviation fuel

<https://www.shell.com/business-customers/aviation/the-future-of-energy/sustainable-aviation-fuel.html>

