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Sustainable Practices in Meetings and Conventions

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine research on the connection of sustainability and the meeting and convention industry. Specifically, this paper closely examines research of the perceptions of meeting planners, venues, and meeting attendees to determine the importance that sustainability has when planning and attending an event. While sustainability has gained importance, it has not proven to be high on the list of priorities for most people involved in the industry; the cost and convenience of an event still takes precedence. It is hypothesized that further education of sustainability in general as well as how it relates to the meeting and event industry will increase the likelihood of someone to plan and conduct a sustainable event. Although the research is limited to a small sample size, education can help in the effort to encourage sustainable practices in the meeting and convention industry.

Keywords: Sustainability, Meetings and Conventions, Conferences, Climate Change

Sustainable Practice in Meetings and Conventions

As the worldwide focus shifts to climate change and ways in which to combat it, there is increasing need for research into sustainable practices that are industry specific to meetings and conventions. The convention industry alone has been rapidly growing, increasing by up to 20 million people in attendance between 2009 and 2012 (Park & Kim, 2017). With these gatherings increasing in attendance, it is imperative that there is research into sustainable practices from the standpoint of both venues and participants as well as the sub-categories that meetings and conventions hold. Some of these sub-categories include transportation, accommodations, food and beverage, and facilities (Park & Kim, 2017). All these areas contribute to the larger picture of a convention or meetings being planned and they contribute to the event's sustainability impact.

Studies have shown that tourism and the industries related to it, such as meetings and conventions, are responsible for up to “5 percent of global CO2 emissions, mostly due to air transportation, lodging, and tourist activities” (Park & Kim, 2017). Furthermore, large events that have high attendance levels create shocking amounts of physical waste. For example, a three-day conference with 1,000 people attending will send 3,480 kg to a landfill by the end of the event (McKinley, 2017). The average conference attendee produces 1.89 kilograms of waste per day which, when multiplied by the length of the conference and the number of attendees, contributes largely to the amount of waste filling our landfills (McKinley, 2017). This focus of this study will research the driving forces behind a sustainable event and how education involving the importance of sustainability might encourage event planners and attendees to choose sustainable practices at events. Also, this study will examine how education is necessary to define sustainable practices and expectations for venues, planners, and attendees.

Literature Review

Recent literature on the topic of sustainable practices in the meeting and convention industry focus on beliefs about sustainability from multiple perspectives. Researchers have used surveys to gauge the importance of sustainability for meeting planners when choosing a destination and venue (Jung, Kim, Malek, & Lee, 2018). There has also been research conducted for convention and meeting attendees to measure their interest in sustainability and how important it is when choosing to take part in an event (Jung et al., 2016). Lastly, researchers have inquired about venues’ interest in sustainable practices and the desire to define the sustainable practices expected of them (Park & Kim, 2017). Overall, there was interest in sustainability among meeting planners, attendees, and venues. However, sustainability remained lower on the list of priorities when planning and attending a conference or meetings.

Meeting planners will have a list of criteria when choosing a venue. They must meet the expectations of the company hosting an event and the people who are expected to attend. Location and cost are two of the biggest factors when choosing a venue and are clear indicators of how popular the venue and event may be. Convenience and safety also are considered when choosing a place to meet. Sustainability has not always been on the list of criteria; however, it has become more popular as awareness grows. According to the researchers, “millennials are the most sustainability conscious generation” and they make up much of the new workforce (Jung, Tanford, Kim, & Raab, 2018). Therefore, researchers hypothesized that sustainability would have gained importance when considering a meeting venue. Researchers used surveys that gave examples of venues and the sustainability rewards they may or may not offer to gauge interest among the meeting planners (Jung et al., 2018).

When surveying meeting planners about the importance of sustainability when choosing a venue, Jung, Tanford, Kim, and Raab (2018) hypothesized that planners would be more inclined to choose a venue that had a sustainability rewards program over one that did not. Furthermore, the authors believed that planners may choose a venue at a second-rate city over a top tier city if a sustainable rewards program was offered (Jung et al., 2018). These hypotheses make sense when considering the growing importance of sustainability in the hospitality industry. However, these surveys still concluded that sustainability was not as high on the list as cost, location, and convenience. Meeting planners have certain criteria when selecting a venue, and pressure to follow these criteria by the companies they work for and the meeting attendees. If sustainability is not considered important to these companies and meeting attendees, then meeting planners appear to not consider it important themselves (Jung et al., 2018).

Meetings and conventions are planned and created by companies and planners, but they are also attended by many people. As the last study showed, meeting planners do not have sustainability high on their priority list when selecting a venue. There are other criteria that meeting planners are not willing to sacrifice when planning their event. However, is sustainability high on the list of priorities when conference attendees are selecting a conference to attend? What will event attendees sacrifice to attend a sustainable event? These questions were asked by many researchers in recent years.

In the article, “An Exploratory Study of Attendee Perceptions of Green Meetings”, researchers looked to gain insight in to how important “green” meetings and conventions were to those that attended them (Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012). In this study researchers surveyed attendees of four large conferences and asked what attendees were willing to do or sacrifice to attend sustainable meetings and conferences. Surveys found that attendees were willing to adopt sustainable practices like staying at the same venue that the conference was being held, eating local food, and even reusing stationary products like pens and notepads. However, attendees were not willing to pay more for a conference that was considered “green” (Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012). These findings relate to the earlier study as the findings were similar. Sustainability appears to be growing in importance but is not important enough to sacrifice cost.

Venues used for conferences and meetings are also a large contributor to the study of sustainability at these events. A venue’s sustainability practices and beliefs might influence the meeting planners and attendees of conferences and meetings taking place there. The article, “In Pursuit of an Environmentally Friendly Convention Industry”, explored these ideas by trying to develop a framework for green conventions and the venues hosting them (Park & Kim, 2017). To develop a framework for sustainable events, researchers first had to define what a sustainable

event is. They defined a sustainable or green event as an event that “minimizes the impact on the environment by applying environmentally preferred practices to reduce waste and to use sustainable resources and supplies” (Park & Kim, 2017). Therefore, any convention or meeting that can minimize its negative environmental impact could be considered a sustainable event. Researchers found that venues are willing to make changes to encourage sustainable practices due to the mounting pressure of guests but are unwilling to spend more money on sustainability if the pressure is not present (Park & Kim, 2017). These studies examined the perceptions of people in the meeting and event industry but did not measure their level of knowledge in connection to sustainability and their field of work. If the people involved in the planning and execution of meetings and conventions had more education of sustainability and how it relates to their field, they would be more likely to choose sustainable practices over the bottom line.

Methodology

The article, “Industry Professional’s Perceptions of Sustainability in Meeting and Event Education”, used in depth interviews to question ten industry professionals on their opinion of the importance of sustainability in the degrees related to their field (Millar & Park, 2018). These professionals had about 19 years of experience and ranged in job titles from managers to vice presidents. Each participant was interviewed for thirty minutes and asked a series of questions about sustainability in the meeting and event planning industry. Among the list of questions, researchers asked their participants to discuss what sustainability topics were important for future workers entering the field to be familiar with. Researchers found that the interviewees agreed that there needs to be more sustainability education throughout the industry’s degrees (Millar & Park, 2018). Furthermore, another research article found a similar response from event professionals. The article, “Sustainable management for maritime events and festivals”, explored

the attitudes of event professionals through interviews and surveys as well. The researchers here had remarkably similar findings, that there was greater need for the measurement and education of sustainable practices to ensure more sustainable events (Gallagher & Pike, 2011).

Findings

In interviewing ten meeting and event professionals, Millar and Park were able to get a clearer sense of what industry professionals believed to be important about sustainability and the event industry (2018). Participants did not have the same definition for sustainability, but a predominant theme of environmental impact and community were present in all participant's responses. Sustainability was an important topic to all participants as they had all seen the growing importance in their industry due to venue regulations and client interest. Participants believed that hospitality students should be learning about sustainability in connection to the meeting and convention industry both in an individual class and throughout other courses as they believed sustainability to be related to all aspects of the business (Millar & Park, 2018).

Furthermore, an overwhelming response from participants was that students should learn about sustainability in a wholistic sense. This means that they hoped to see students learning about all the sub-categories of conventions and meetings such as transportation, food and beverage, lodging, etc., and how each category can improve its sustainability efforts. Participants also felt it was important to reinforce that sustainability can be viewed from the business level as well as an environmental one. If students are familiar with how businesses and venues can save money by using these sustainable practices, then they may be more likely to choose them when planning events. Companies and venues that are focused on the bottom line only may see some financial benefit from being more sustainable. Professionals entering the workforce may be able

to sell these sustainable practices better when they understand the financial and environmental implications (Millar & Park, 2018).

Limitations

These findings certainly make the argument for more education on sustainability in hospitality programs, especially programs that focus on students interested in the meeting and convention industry. However, a sample size of only ten people is extremely limited. A larger sample would provide the researchers with an exact validity by giving them the ability to generalize their findings. Also, researchers used open ended questions in an interview format to obtain their information. While this method worked to allow participants to explain their answers and elaborate, it makes it more difficult to quantify the answers because they may have slight differences. A larger sample size is necessary to examine the opinions of the meeting and convention industry. Gathering surveys from a more diverse demographic, while staying within the industry, will give researchers more data which will lead to broader findings (Millar & Park, 2018).

Implications

While the practice of being sustainable or going “green” is attractive to many event professionals and attendees in theory, it has been difficult to define what exactly that means. A convention consists of many categories that most do not think of such as transportation, buying, event operation, and facility management (Park & Kim, 2017). These categories also need to adopt sustainable practices to truly adapt to new standards to decrease climate change. More research needs to be done in these sub-categories to be able to quantify their impact and encourage changes.

Further research into education on sustainability and climate change needs to take place to measure if people with a deeper understanding of these issues might be inclined to plan a more sustainable event or choose to only attend events that are using sustainable practices. While research thus far has measured perceptions of sustainable events, there is missing information on the education levels of research participants and if increased education on the topic would affect their decisions. Seasoned professionals have recognized the importance of sustainability in hospitality education and how it is necessary to prepare students entering the meeting and convention planning workforce (Millar & Park, 2018). Further research could examine existing hospitality coursework on the undergraduate and graduate levels to find what percentage of the education is dedicated to sustainability. Also, researchers could work to discover what sustainability education, if any, there is for new hires within major hospitality companies. The meeting and convention industry would benefit from knowing what students entering the workforce are being taught about sustainability and how it relates to the industry, so that companies can continue the efforts and education in order to encourage sustainable and eco-friendly business practices.

Conclusion

It is no surprise that the meeting and convention industry is a large contributor to environmental waste each year. As the industry grows, so does its contributions to global climate change through the many areas that operate to make these events run smoothly. Transportation, food and beverage, facility management, and purchasing are all categories within the frame of meetings and conventions. Deeper understanding of how these subcategories contribute to climate change may motivate the industry to make more sustainable choices. Research has been conducted to find out the perceptions of sustainability from the point of view of meeting

planners, venues, and event attendees, but there has not been enough research into sustainability education in the meeting and convention industry. Further research should be conducted to find whether more education of sustainability in the meeting and event industry would encourage professional to choose more sustainable options in their events. Through education and research, the industry can look forward to positive change in adopting sustainable practices that will benefit everyone.

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