



## Having a Human Impact: *What is social responsibility for meetings?*

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### Lessons from Kindergarten....

Back in kindergarten I learned some simple things. I learned that getting glue in your hair is not a fun thing, that mud pies are not as tasty as real pies and that if you want to earn a friend, you have to be a friend.

In today's meeting industry we talk a lot about social responsibility, and the importance of acting on issues that are relevant to our stakeholders. We use a lot of complicated language to describe issues and actions related to social responsibility: worker's rights, fair trade, equality, accessibility, ethics, human rights, social equity & investment, poverty alleviation, volunteerism, triple-bottom line ROI, health & safety, traditional territory rights...the list goes on.

For me, I try to simplify. I boil it down to acknowledging our obligation to affirm and enable others. It's about the basic things you learn as a child: to share, to be kind, to be fair, to respect, and to not discriminate. But my definition is not everyone's definition.

MeetGreen recently completed a focus group in partnership with Vancouver Island University. We asked a small group of meeting professionals – both planners and suppliers – to share their perspectives on social responsibility in the meeting industry. Their comments were insightful and eye-opening. Among many observations made during the focus group was a clear need to confirm exactly what social responsibility means for meetings. Despite decades of combined expertise among those offering their observations, complete consensus only emerged about the lack of universally accepted definition for socially responsible meetings.

With that in mind MeetGreen asks: What is social responsibility for meetings? We invite you to read, think, discuss and act.

## HUMAN IMPACT

### Principles for Social Responsibility

*Law*

*Ethics*

*Stakeholders*

*Engagement*



## Social Responsibility

When forging connections between people is a fundamental part of what you do, it is impossible to separate social responsibility from meetings and events.

Many agencies interpret the term social responsibility in the context of sustainability. The meeting professionals in our focus group often referred to it as one of the three legs on the stool of sustainability, which includes social, environmental and economic considerations. The 'social' element can be considered society - the human part of the equation - ripe with all of its competing interests.

### **The Law**

There are already many things we have to do in the meetings industry that are socially responsible. This is what we have laws for. We are required to pay a minimum wage in many jurisdictions we work in. We are required to operate a safe work place. We are mandated to provide insurance, and abide by fire codes. These are basic expectations for holding an event. However, laws requiring social responsibility are not the norm in all places we meet.

### **Ethics**

In the absence of law, and in addition to the law, ethics are important. Those of us planning meetings in global locations cannot assume the same workplace laws and safety regulations exist in these destinations as in our home location. The onus is on us to research these issues and ask the question. Even in the presence of law, we can't assume people always comply with it. Then consider all those acts that exceed legal requirements. Think about all the different ways we help and improve conditions for our fellow humans through meetings by volunteering, donating, involving students and providing education. These kinds of actions demonstrate a universal human ethic to better ourselves and society, which transcends the law.

### **Stakeholders**

At its essence social responsibility exercises the obligation we have to engage those who we directly interact with during event planning and indirectly affect by our actions. This includes our attendees, but also extends beyond them. Think about the people living in the cities you meet in. We need to understand how our actions can be a positive or negative force in creating quality of life and enriching experiences. In the case of the meetings industry, to ignore this is to risk losing participants, sponsors, exhibitors and suppliers; all of whom are the foundation of your successful event.

# Three Degrees of Social Responsibility

There are numerous academic definitions and concepts related to social responsibility. What is perhaps more relevant for meetings and events is to capture practical definitions of this concept. The meeting professionals we interviewed in our focus group are starting to act on social responsibility in different ways. Voluntary action for social responsibility appears to come in three degrees:

First **1** Degree:  
*Feel good, look good*

Second **2** Degree:  
*Responsible action in planning*

Third **3** Degree:  
*Advocacy for responsibility*

HUMAN  
IMPACT

First Degree  
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First Degree  
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Look Good

The most popular form of social responsibility for meetings falls into this category. This includes donation and volunteer projects. These kinds of projects contribute to a sustainable cause, but are also equally directed at providing promotional benefits to the donor agency. These kinds of socially responsible acts can be measured in terms of number of media opportunities, and the financial value of exposure.

### Donation Programs

Many meeting planners have started to take the time to integrate important donation programs into their conferences. These programs might be a call to action for participants, challenging them to raise funds or provide items for certain causes as part of the event. Book drives, food drives, natural disaster relief and silent auctions are good examples. They may also include donation of leftover conference materials to community groups. Programs might be associated with an isolated event, or an organization as a whole, taking the form of permanent legacies. For example a meeting supplier might annually raise money for local schools, the United Way, UNICEF, or other important causes. These projects are typically measured by the amount of funds raised. Donation projects are moving beyond merely giving leftovers and organizing fundraisers, however. Some organizations are budgeting funds or securing sponsorships to support experiences at their event that are driving more socially beneficial outcomes. These objectives might include providing job training, student work placement, or scholarships to support conference participation by traditionally marginalized groups.

*Since the first Greenbuild International Conference and Expo, the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) has prioritized socially responsible action. Since 2002 USGBC has donated 60,000 lbs of food and tradeshow materials in host communities, benefitting over 31 different agencies. In addition, USGBC contributes \$10,000 towards a Legacy Project, which is chosen by the Greenbuild Host Committee. In 2009 Greenbuild supported two Legacies: a Solar Commons in the Light Rail Right of Way and a Net Zero Energy Affordable Home in Phoenix, AZ. Greenbuild 2009 also supported 32 needs-based scholarships to engage populations under-represented in the green building movement and five students were able to attend through the Young Leader's Award Program. In addition, Greenbuild 2009 also hosted its first free Green Building Job Fair, connecting 532 job-seekers with prospective employers in the green building, construction and design fields.*



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### **Volunteer Projects**

Volunteer projects are differentiated from donations as these typically include a direct action to engage in a project. It does not necessarily involve raising money or resources. What makes these projects unique is there is usually a direct connection forged between the donor and beneficiaries through the action. In addition, the projects serve to forge connection among donors, helping them to build relationships and network through events in a very unique way. These projects give the gift of time and action by participants and may be measured by the number of people participating, hours donated or number of actions taken. A project may include an excursion to prepare meals at a soup kitchen, or deliver blankets to the homeless. It could also involve the construction of facilities for organizations like Habitat for Humanity. Some volunteer projects have an environmental element, providing opportunities for attendees to plant trees or participate in a community clean-up. Like donation programs, volunteer projects may have a short or long-term duration, some seeking to leave a permanent legacy with host communities or service groups.

*In 2005 Fairmont Hotels & Resorts launched Eco-Innovations, hotel-based projects that encourage partnerships and learning while highlighting a universal environmental issue in a way that hits close to home. On Hawaii's Big Island, The Fairmont Orchid has developed the Room to Reef project, an integrated approach to sustainability that extends from rooms cleaned with non-toxic, biodegradable products to organic landscaping, marine health and guest learning. Partnering with a local university, hotel colleagues support regular monitoring of the nearby coral reef, as well as guided snorkeling trips for guests.*

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## Second Degree Responsible Action in Planning

Some meetings are starting to take things to the Second Degree. This includes actions that integrate social responsibility into fundamental planning actions, like procurement and hiring. There are often direct financial implications to this kind of action, some positive, some negative. For example fair trade-certified goods can cost more, however these increases can be neutralized by savings associated with using local staff for events.

### Fair trade

When you buy any product for your meeting you have three choices. Get the best deal for yourself, give the best deal to the manufacturer or get the best deal for both of you. Meeting professionals who integrate social responsibility into purchasing try to do the latter. Sometimes goods are produced in ways that do not allow everyone to share in the benefits. Farmers may not be able to own the land they grow a crop on, they might not be paid a living wage, or given a fair fee for their crop. When you buy fair trade you send a message that we all need to ask questions about how products are made, and how producers benefit. Fortunately there are tools out there that help planners source fairly traded products, such as Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International: <http://www.fairtrade.net/home.html>

*Although a fair trade standard is better than no standards, MeetGreen was recently faced with a decision of which fair trade standard? In our research we found not all standards are created equally. A major coffee brand was able to provide us with an independently-certified Fair Trade coffee for \$62 per gallon, or a self-branded fair trade coffee for \$55 per gallon. After undertaking research we determined a self-branded standard was better than no standard, but that Fair Trade certified is better. The main reason was that third party accredited standards involve an independent observer. In addition we learned that the self-branded standard, while requiring higher sustainability standards, does not guarantee a minimum price for coffee produced using these guidelines. It puts the cost burden back onto the grower. The clear lesson: ask questions about certifications and know what you are buying!*

### Local

Buying local can be associated with both social and environmental responsibility. It reduces energy use and greenhouse gas emissions by requiring less transportation. It also ensures that the economic benefits of your event are directed at the communities you meet in, which is socially responsible. In addition, buying local can also cut costs by minimizing shipping and transportation. Many planners are finding it beneficial to produce signage and print materials locally. Use of local labor and rental furnishings is also helping exhibitors and general services contractors demonstrate socially responsible procurement. The number of workers hired from local pools and value of purchases made in host destinations are important metrics that can be tracked.

*Tracking local purchases is no small feat. Just ask Hartmann Studios and Moscone Center. Both companies provide over 162,000 lbs of food to cater Oracle OpenWorld 2009. How do they know? Because every apple, chicken breast and wine bottle served to the 37,000 participants was tracked in order to determine specifically what was local. The event defined local as within 100 miles of the San Francisco venue, and differentiated on the basis of what was locally grown, and what was locally processed. In the end 60%, or 96,897 lbs, of food and beverage was locally sourced.*

## Health & Safety

It may seem obvious, but cannot be understated: people need healthy and safe environments to work in. In acknowledgement of this meeting planners are starting to require suppliers to source products that are safe for human and environmental health. At the most basic level hotels and venues are being contracted to use cleaners that are environmentally-certified. Planners, sponsors and exhibitors are ensuring giveaways are bisphenol-A (BPA)-free. More and more cities and regions are instituting no-smoking bylaws to promote public health. Non-idling is becoming a more common request of transportation companies where local law does not already require this. All of these actions show meeting professionals are institutionalizing purchasing requirements that support safer, healthier workplaces and communities.

*Many meeting planners check off the basics in site selection: appropriate meeting venue, available hotels, attractive amenities, affordability....non-smoking. Non-smoking? If you're the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) not only do you find cities that can meet your space requirements, but you consider if they have laws that support your policies for promoting good health. That includes non-smoking. In 2003 CMA adopted the following Resolution at their Annual Meeting: "The CMA support comprehensive environmental tobacco smoke legislation in all Canadian jurisdictions by actively seeking the support of Canadian organizations and corporations to hold their annual meetings only in those jurisdictions where legislation ensures a 100% ban on smoking in indoor public places."*

## Sensitivities

As a meeting professional you hone skills that anticipate the needs of stakeholders. You do things before being asked. You create experiences that are successful and memorable because they are absent of issues that make your participants dissatisfied. This demands awareness of different things related to diet, ability, culture and other human characteristics that enable participation and enjoyment of events. This kind of sensitivity is what is calling hotels to create allergy-sensitive rooms. Universal design of venues is being pursued to enable participation by people of all physical abilities equally, without making those with physical challenges feel they are being 'accommodated', or treated differently. Cultural, religious and sexual sensitivity is also requiring consideration be given to planning events that respect human diversity. This may include integrating religious or cultural observances into scheduling considerations. For some audiences it may involve providing special menus to meet dietary requirements and modified washroom facilities.

*Allergy-friendly hotel and meeting rooms are emerging worldwide in response to guest concerns about sensitivities to pollen, dust and pollutants. Patented processes filter air and water to protect guests from irritants while also providing hypo-allergenic linens and upholstery cleaning to keep rooms fresh.*

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## Third Degree Advocacy for Social Responsibility

The brave new world of social responsibility in meetings involves taking a stand to change practice. This is where social responsibility can start to become a little uncomfortable, and down-right revolutionary.

### Regulation Advocacy

Every year MeetGreen conducts site visits to properties to gain insight into how well they are implementing socially and environmentally responsible practices. The majority are transparent, allowing access to back of house areas to verify sustainability is being practiced. A handful, however, display a disregard for social responsibility. This has been most notable in the area of accessibility. Many jurisdictions have laws guaranteeing access to people with disabilities, however, watchdog groups continue to flag and prosecute accommodation providers who are found in non-compliance. Some meeting planners even go as far as to employ special accessibility specialists to inspect facilities to ensure services are in place, and advocate for compliance with laws.

In other instances regulations do not exist to protect some of the things we take for granted as law in certain countries. In these situations socially responsible practices can be integrated into contracts. Clauses in use include explicit requirements to protect children from exploitation, ensure worker safety through the provision first aid and fire prevention, and demonstrate practices that support equitable hiring.

*The Unitarian Universalist Association takes accessibility so seriously they inspect every venue and hotel to make sure their participants have services available. Not only do they make sure minimum legal requirements are met, but educate hotels and venues about principles of universal design that make their properties more inclusive of all users, without discrimination.*

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## Destinations & Human Rights

Have you ever thought about how human rights factors into destination selection? Odds are, probably not. But think about it: what does your destination say about you and your organization? What could it say if you used destination selection to better the living conditions in the places you meet? Meetings are in a rare position to advocate for change about human rights through destination selection. Many corporations and associations have social responsibility platforms: women's rights, children's education, fair labor, health and medicine. Planners have an opportunity to open dialogue about these issues and leave legacies in destinations where they may not be a priority. On the extreme side this may lead an organization to avoid destinations with a bad record of human rights. For other organizations it might lead them to take the bull by the horns and use their event as a catalyst to improve social responsibility in places where issues exist.

*Responsible meetings create better places for people to live in and meet in. Meeting planners interested to uncover what human rights issues exist in your next meeting location are encouraged to visit Amnesty International's website: <http://www.amnesty.org/>. Search for country-specific issues under the "Learn About Human Rights" tab.*

## Vendor Selection & Social Action

Do your suppliers act on social responsibility? Are they advocating for change within their own supply chain? Have they been targeted with workplace action? Much like destinations, action in this area may lead an organization to avoid a property, chain or supplier that has become a target of workplace action. To be socially responsible, this avoidance behavior should not merely reduce the risk posed to your meeting in the event it may be picketed. It requires consideration of the grievances specifically and may even help facilitate conflict resolution. Suppliers themselves may choose to address issues head on, and work specifically with stakeholders to address them.

*The bags, the t-shirts, the branded water bottles, the limited edition action-figures and gadgets...meeting professionals are often guilty of excessive giveaways. In recent years many promotional product providers have launched green lines, but few are looking into the social aspects of their products. Fairware works with auditors from Openview to ensure that suppliers of their products meet Fair Labor Association and Ethical Trading Initiative Guidelines. This includes traveling to factories to inspect facilities, making sure working conditions are safe and practices are fair, all the way down to the installation of working fire extinguishers and accurate timecards.*



# Having a Human Impact

## Every Step is Progress

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Meeting professionals of all types are venturing further into the realm of socially responsible meetings. Action appears to suggest social responsibility involves donating and volunteering to support worthwhile causes, adjusting purchasing practices to support local, fair trade and socially responsible procurement and advocacy to support human rights and law reform. Whether they are taking it to the first, second or third degree each step forward is progress toward embracing our opportunity to use meetings to improve quality of life.

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