

# 118

## SUSTAINABILITY/ GREEN INITIATIVES

### INSTRUCTOR

---

**Todd Hunt, CVE**

Senior Vice President  
Venue Coalition/Arena  
Network  
Camarillo, CA

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

---

At the conclusion of this session, participants will be able to:

1. Define sustainability.
2. List the reasons why venue managers should implement sustainability initiatives.
3. Formulate three sustainability initiatives for a venue.
4. Create a Sustainability Action Plan.

## ***Introduction***

Many venue managers used to spend very little time thinking about the vast amount of resources that events and venues consume. Traditionally their jobs were to book the venue, provide services to clients (i.e. exhibitors, fans, attendees and other guests), operate their venues as efficiently and effectively as possible, and generate an economic impact. The focus had been on the events and success was measured, in many cases, primarily on the basis of revenue and economic impact generated. While all of those factors remain vitally important; sustainability has emerged as an important factor.

In the United States, the green building movement can be traced back to the first Earth Day in 1970 and the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the same year (Kibert, 2004).

Public venues are designed to serve the needs of consumers and stakeholders (i.e., human needs) for events such as: festivals, stadium concerts, conferences, expos, and sport events. These events use up resources, send out emissions, and generate a large amount of waste. In most cases, venues have had significant negative impacts on the natural environment and on human health and performance.

Most recently green construction and retrofitting have been developed as the practical answer to the perceived environmental and health burdens of the venue environment. The following explains why sustainability is important, various types of green initiatives, and a list of resources to assist in your quest for enhancing your venue's sustainability efforts. The session will also answer some questions you may have about sustainability or supply you with enough information to go out and ask the right questions of your contractors and suppliers, production staff, and venue owners.

## ***Sustainability***

Sustainability is not an easy subject to approach because it is multidisciplinary, and there is a tremendous amount of information for consideration. When searching online for "sustainability", over 3.9 billion results appear, over 871 million for "green meetings", and over 552 million results for "green venues". Needless to say, there is so much information that it can be overwhelming and knowing where to start (if

you haven't already done so) can be a bit intimidating.

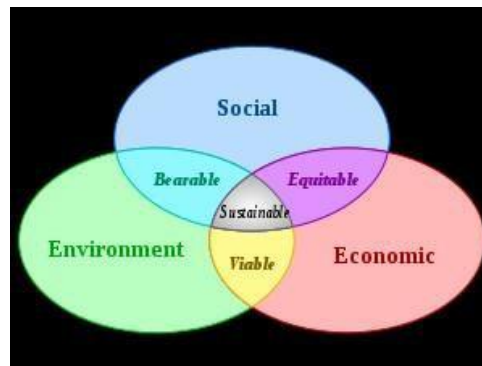
One of the best-known general definitions came from a 1987 United Nations report about sustainable development, which was described as development “*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*” Take a minute to think about that statement. It provides a concise, yet powerful meaning of sustainability.

***Sustainability***  
“Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”

With the size of the venue industry and the millions of people who attend events each year, we have a responsibility to ensure sustainable event management.

### ***Why is sustainability important?***

Overall sustainability is basically founded on a simple principle: everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. As such, it is important for each of us to make sure that we have - and will continue to have - water, air quality, energy and other resources.



**Winter 2012 Research Report, “Sustainability Nears a Tipping Point” conducted by MIT Sloan Management Review and the Boston Consulting Group:**

The chart shows the scheme of sustainable development occurs at the confluence of three constituent parts: social, economic and environmental.

Over 4,000 managers and executives from 113 countries responded as to how they are developing and implementing sustainable business practices.

- 70% of these companies have now placed sustainability

- permanently on their management agendas and;
- 66% stated that sustainability was necessary to being competitive in today's marketplace, up from 55% in the previous survey

The research report also stated that, “Moreover, despite a lackluster economy, many companies are increasing their commitments to sustainability initiatives, which is the opposite of what one would expect if sustainability were simply a luxury afforded by good times.” About 1/3 of these companies stated that sustainability initiatives directly contribute to their profitability.

When asked to name the major factor that led to change in their business model as a result of sustainability considerations, over 40% responded that “customers prefer sustainable products and services”. As venue managers, we can relate to that because many of our clients who are deciding where to book their events are inserting sustainability practices of the destination and venues in their request for proposals.

Many clients, exhibitors, attendees, patrons, fans, etc. are now not just expecting, but are demanding that the venues with which they do business have sustainable practices. As venue managers, we need to listen to what our customers and other stakeholders are saying, and we need to act.

To summarize, the MIT Sloan Management Review Report indicated companies do believe sustainable practices are important and are making firm commitments to those practices by investing both time and money in incorporating sustainability initiatives as part of the basic framework of their business plans. What about us, as venue managers?

### **IAVM and Sustainability**

In 2025, IAVM announced a partnership with Honeycomb Strategies and Trade Show News Network to create Venue Sustainalytics, a first-of-its-kind sustainability benchmarking and data intelligence platform purpose-built for event venues and organizers that will provide insights to help the events industry move into a greener future. Venue Sustainalytics is a tool that will help benchmark our industry by tracking basic environmental and social data year over year in an anonymous and aggregated fashion. The data collected includes annual energy, water, and waste data, as well as transportation, procurement, and social initiatives, overlaid with basic venue operations information like square footage and number of annual events hosted. A copy of the report will be given to each venue that completes it and an industry overview will be available each year. As of this writing, the first report was still in development.

Prior to the partnership that created Venue Sustainalytics, one of the tasks of IAVM's Sustainability Committee was to research the sustainability practices of IAVM members. IAVM's most recent Sustainability Survey report (from 2019) demonstrates how important and relevant environmental sustainability and sustainable practices have become:

- In 2019 78% of the respondents indicated that it is very important for their venue to be environmentally friendly (compared to 43% in 2014).
- 93% of venues are implementing some sort of green practice in their buildings.
- 76% of the facilities have implemented more sustainable practices than they were doing three years ago

- Other key takeaways were:
  - 49% of venues reported cost savings from implementing sustainable practices
  - 54% of venues struggle with funding when implementing sustainability practices

IAVM’s Sustainability Survey also revealed that 53 buildings listed they were LEED certified, while 4 were ISO 14001 certified. Note in case any of you are not familiar with LEED and ISO 14001, these terms are explained later in this monograph.

It is positive that, similar to the global organizations noted in the MIT Sloan Research Report, Venue Managers are increasingly coming to the same conclusion: sustainability is important and should be included as part of each venue’s strategic business plan.

### ***Building Environmental Impact***

In the United States in 2024, buildings accounted for:

- 40 percent of total energy use and 75 percent of electricity consumption
- 35 percent of greenhouse gas emissions
- 30 percent of raw materials use
- 30 percent of waste output (136 million tons annually)
- 12 percent of potable water consumption

Sources: U.S. Green Building Council,

National Renewable Energy Laboratory

- All of us have physical venues, which have positive impacts for our communities. Conversely, whether they are small, medium or large convention centers, performing art theatres, stadiums, or arenas, etc. our venues can have a significant negative impact on the environment. Events can have a huge negative impact on the environment if not managed properly. Examples from authors Amy Spatrisano and Nancy Wilson, authors of “Simple Steps to Green Meetings and Events”:

- The US Environmental Protection Agency estimates the average conference participant uses 846 gallons (3,202.46 liters) of water. For a 1,000-person conference, that's 1.3 Olympic-sized swimming pools.
- During a regular five-day conference, 2,500 attendees will use 62,500 plates, 87,500 napkins, 75,000 cups or glasses and 90,000 cans or bottles.
- According to a study by the Environmental Protection Agency, the average US meeting attendee, over the course of a three-day event, accounts for the emission of more than 1,400 pounds of greenhouse gases—the amount a typical driver produces driving a car for a month.

A typical three-day event with 10,000 people produces approximately **600,000** pounds (300 tons) of waste.

For a typical convention/meeting event, each attendee produces approximately 20 pounds of waste per show day. Thus, for a typical three-day event with 10,000 people, approximately **600,000** pounds (300 tons) of waste is produced. That should be enough to get our attention so we will lead the charge to mitigate that impact.

### *Venue Sustainability Initiatives*

The good news is that with some planning and determination many of the negative impacts associated with operating a building can be reduced. It is almost impossible for most venues to reach “net zero impact” but reducing the impact where possible will create savings that go straight to the bottom line and can help mitigate the negative environmental impact. If a venue’s leadership/ownership is not interested in environmental sustainability, they will certainly appreciate operating more efficiently and the savings that go along with it in many cases.

Since most venues already have many sustainability initiatives, this monograph will not go into depth about where you should start. If your venue has not jumped on this fast-moving train, read the literature, contact members of the sustainability team and also other venue managers who are actively involved in “greening” their venue and its events and create a green team. There are also plenty of agencies to assist, as explained below.

## **U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC)**

The USGBC is a nonprofit organization committed to a prosperous and sustainable future through cost-efficient and energy-saving green buildings. They strive to transform the market through the LEED green building certification program, educational opportunities, a network of chapters and affiliates, the annual Greenbuild International Conference & Expo, professional credentials and advocacy in support of public policy that encourages and enables green buildings and communities.

## **Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)**



Per USGBC, LEED is redefining the way we think about the places where we live, work and learn. LEED provides building owners and operators with a framework for identifying and implementing practical and measurable green building design, construction, operations and maintenance solutions.

The LEED green building program is a voluntary, consensus-based global rating system for buildings, homes and communities that are designed, constructed, maintained and operated for improved environmental and human health performance. LEED address all types of buildings.

**LEED EB (Existing Building)** contains six categories and credits for certification:

1. Sustainable Sites
2. Water Efficiency
3. Energy & Atmosphere
4. Materials & Resources
5. Indoor Environmental Quality
6. Innovation in Operations

Certified: 40-49 points; Silver 50-59 points;

Gold 60-79 points; Platinum 80-110 points

The *LEED Professional Credentials* (LEED AP and Green Associate) are professional designations for those who have demonstrated a thorough understanding of green building techniques, environmental issues, the LEED program and the certification process. The LEED credentials show differentiation in a growing and competitive industry and allow for varied levels of specialization.

### **ISO 14001 Certification**

ISO 14000 (Internal Organization for Standardization) is a series of international standards related to environmental management and basically provides a framework for the development of the system and the supporting audit program. ISO 14001 specifies the requirements for an environmental management system (EMS) and applies to those environmental aspects which the organization has control and over which it can be expected to have influence. See reference section. The Orange County Convention Center (OCCC) was the first convention center in the U.S. to receive ISO 14001 certification and has since been recertified. There are at least four other venues who are also certified.

As relayed by the ISO, the standard is applicable to any organization (not just venues) that wish to:

- Implement, maintain and improve an environmental management system
- Assure itself of its conformance with its own stated environmental policy (those policy commitments must be made) demonstrate conformance
- Ensure compliance with environmental laws and regulations
- Seek certification of its environmental management system by an external third part organization
- Make a self-determination of conformance

### ***Initiatives***

The top ten sustainability initiatives that routinely need to be addressed are as follows

1. Commitment/Educate/Communicate
2. Energy Consumption

3. Water Consumption
4. Recycling/Composting
5. Sustainable Purchasing (including Food Service, Janitorial Products, etc.)
6. Indoor Air Quality
7. Hazmat Reduction (Cleaning, Maintenance)
8. Transportation
9. Renewable Energy
10. Construction/Planning

While the list is not intended to be in priority order, invariably Commitment/ Educate/ Communicate is on the bottom of the list. However, without that being number one, it would be difficult for a venue to be successful in any of the areas below it. Leadership from the top is needed to ensure that sustainability initiatives become incorporated in the venue's business strategy and receive the resources needed.

***For Example:***

At the Orange County Convention Center (OCCC) in Orlando, the Executive team committed in writing the expectation to be engaged in sustainability efforts. Also in full building meetings and other training opportunities, becoming more sustainable is routinely emphasized. The SCORE values which are or core values that guide all employees at the OCCC: the "S" in SCORE used to stand for Safety. Safeguarding the safety and welfare of our clients, exhibitors, attendees and our employees is still number one. However, the "S" has become S squared in that it also now stands for Sustainability in addition to Safety. Each employee, as well as contractors and other business partners, needs to walk-the-talk, becoming part of the solution.

How do you communicate your venue's commitment to sustainability efforts? For most venues, energy and water consumption are two of the best places to identify opportunities for conservation, and there are often incentives available to help offset the cost. Capital funding should be identified as a key component to enhancing many sustainability initiatives. Some of the capital projects can have a significant impact on the amount your venue could save in your operating budget.

## ***Energy Management***

Energy Management, which is second on the list, is usually the one that most venues reap the most benefits in terms of actual savings and curtailing future expenditures. For example, the Orange County Convention Center is seven million square feet of space under roof, so even a slight percentage decrease in the utility bill can amount to huge dollar savings. Even if your venue decides not to become LEED certified, following the LEED guidelines related to optimizing energy efficiency performance is a good road map. Partner with your local utility provider and participate in Critical Peak Pricing, which encourages conservation during peak periods when energy costs are higher if feasible. Have an energy audit performed. Sign up for Energy Star and track your progress.

Utilize energy management software and energy efficient lighting. Check the energy efficiency of your food and beverage equipment. Are your dishwashers energy efficient or are they wasting electricity and water? Even things as simple as closing dock doors leading to the concourse areas during move in days and adjusting the temperature settings slightly can make a bottom-line difference.

## **Water**

Remember the days when water pitchers used to be placed on each table in a meeting room and water glasses were always set for banquets? What a waste of labor and more importantly water, which is a precious resource. As noted in *Simple Steps to Green Meeting and Events*, for a three-day event serving 4,200 attendees, not pre-filling water glasses and not using pitchers saved 520 gallons (1,968 liters) of drinking water and 12,400 gallons (46,939 liters) of dishwater.

Again, for tips to conserve water, follow the steps for LEED regarding water performance measurements, water efficient landscaping, cooling tower water management, etc. Is your venue using low flow and automatic toilets? Aerators for faucets? A silver lining of the pandemic was that many venues were able to use grant funding to install touchless faucets as a way to check the spread of viruses. While this is a great practice in terms of minimizing the spread of germs, it also serves a dual purpose in reducing the amount of water wasted by unattended faucets. Check out additional tips from the EPA also regarding Water Sense in the reference section.

## **Recycling**

Partner with your waste hauler and ensure your contract includes tracking your waste. Audit your waste stream from beginning to end. Are you or your contractor separating your cardboard, plastic, etc.? Do your employees have recycling containers near them for paper, plastics, etc.? Are the recycling bins in the concourses or common areas clearly marked? Does your venue compost or otherwise divert your food waste? Does your F&B provider recycle cooking oil? Do you monitor your diversion rate?

Diversion rate is the percentage of waste materials diverted from the landfill to be recycled, composted or reused.

Write down your diversion rate goal and create a plan to increase that percentage. Include the goal as part of your regular management team meetings so the goal becomes part of the business strategy of your operations. List your accomplishments on your website, on the monitors in your venue. How much did your venue save on tipping fees (the cost to have your dumpsters hauled away, not a gratuity on top of a bill) because of your recycling program? Explore joining the Waste Wise Program.

How do you report the amount of reuse your venue creates, such as food donations from your F&B provider, donations from your clients to local charities, etc.?

For further information related to the remaining sustainability initiatives please refer to the references noted. Also use the applicable guidelines in LEED EB as a resource.

## ***Sustainable Events***

### **Green Sports Alliance**

For sports venues, The Green Sports Alliance has a mission of helping sports teams, venues and leagues enhance environmental performance. Their website is noted in the reference section. Professional and amateur leagues along with sports venues are coming together to address a common environmental agenda.

Five of the Greenest Venues in the World

#### 1. ***Climate Pledge Arena***

Seattle, WA

The home to the NHL's Kraken is 100% powered by renewable energy, offers free public transportation to its events, and has been certified as a functionally zero waste facility.

2. ***Golden One Center***  
Sacramento, California

In 2016 the Kings new venue became the first indoor venue in the world to be certified LEED Platinum.

3. ***Music City Center***

Nashville, Tennessee

This LEED Gold facility has four acres of green roofing, the largest such roof in the southeast US.

4. ***Kaseya Arena***

Miami, Florida

The first venue in the world to be recertified LEED Gold diverts over 330,000 pounds of waste from landfills.

5. ***Mercedes Benz Stadium***

Atlanta, Georgia

The home of the Atlanta Falcons opened as the first LEED Platinum stadium in the NFL in 2017.

### **Carbon Offsets and Renewable Energy Certificates**

Demand for sustainable, green events continues to rise. Planners and attendees place a growing importance on whether public venues, such as convention centers, arenas, and performing arts centers, have instituted sustainability initiatives. In addition to the usual eco-friendly measures such as efficient lighting, recycling and paper saving, the newer frontiers of renewable energy use and carbon offsetting are receiving more attention. Venues that can host events of any magnitude with little or no impact on the environment enjoy a competitive advantage. Options for venues include Renewable Energy Certificates to match event-related electricity use and carbon offsets to mitigate travel impacts and achieve business objectives:

- Complement and extend effectiveness of existing sustainability initiatives
- Differentiate from competitors as a venue that cares about the environment and sustainability
- Offer clients a sustainable energy option for green events
- Gain media exposure and public relations opportunities

### **Renewable Energy Certificates (REC's)**

Green-e Energy certified RECs verify production of electricity from sustainable and renewable power projects located throughout the United States and in Canada. Every megawatt-hour of RECs means that another 1,555 pounds, or 0.7 metric tons, of greenhouse gas emissions has been avoided.

***Carbon Offsets:*** Venues and planners can also elect to mitigate event-related transportation impacts with carbon offsets. Each Green-e Climate certified offset represents 1 metric ton of verified reductions of carbon dioxide or its equivalent greenhouse gas emissions. Offsets come from U.S. and international projects certified by the Verified Carbon Standard

or Climate Action Reserve. Attendees can also offset their travel impacts with carbon offsets.

### ***Events Industry Council's Sustainability Initiative***

Once known as the Green Meetings Industry Council, they developed a best practices framework, which balances environmental, economic, and social impacts related to an organization's business needs and encourages meeting planners to follow. Refer to references.

We, as venues, need to be their partner in making more sustainable meetings happen. The Sustainability Initiative's site contains a variety of useful data and tips for all types of venues and events.

### ***Events Industry Council Sustainable Event Standards***

Beginning in 2012 and last updated in 2022, the Events Industry Council (EIC) provides a framework for sustainable event standards.

This process was a lengthy one involving the EIC, the American Society for Testing and Materials International (ASTM), Green Meetings Industry Council (GMIC), U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), hundreds of industry volunteers and numerous technical and sustainability experts. The nine standards are listed below:

- Event Organiser Standard
- All Supplier Standards (Combined)
- Accommodation Standard
- Audio Visual and Production Standard
- Destination Standard
- Exhibition Services Standard
- Food & Beverage Standard
- Integrated Property Standard
- Venue Standard

Each of the specific sustainable elements are addressed in each standard: staff management and environmental policy, communications, waste, energy, air quality, water, procurement and community partners. Applicable venue staff should get acquainted with these standards and ensure your venue's business partners do the same.

### *Summary*

Venues that are operated in a sustainable manner are more valuable to their communities because they consume fewer resources than their conventional counterparts. They also serve as role models for responsible environmental stewardship and have the opportunity to educate the many people that pass through them each year regarding sustainability.

Many venues have already embraced sustainability and are currently reaping the economic, social and environmental rewards. Most venue managers are happy to assist other IAVM members move forward by sharing sustainability information and lessons learned. IAVM's Sustainability Committee members will willingly lend a helping hand. VenueNet is a great place to post a question and let the power of the IAVM community guide your journey.

Kermit the Frog claims "It's not easy being green." Implementing sustainability initiatives at our venues isn't always easy at times. It's all about creating a culture so sustainability is ingrained as part of what we do. Investing in the future by protecting our environment today is worth it.

## ***References and Other Sources***

### **Industry sites:**

#### **IAVM**

Visit IAVM's Green Glossary of Terms. The website also contains Green Tips and sample sustainable related RFP's.

<http://www.iavm.org/sustainability>

<https://www.venuesustainalytics.com/>

Mahoney, Kimberly; Eस्कilsen, Lee; Jeralds, Adonis "Sporty"; Camp, Steve. *Public Assembly Venue Management: Sports, Entertainment, Meeting, And Convention Venues*. Dallas, TX: Brown Books Publishing Group.

### ***International Association of Exhibitions and Events:***

<http://www.iaee.com/resources/sustainability-initiative/>

### **Building Certifications:**

LEED for Existing Buildings Operations + Maintenance

<https://www.usgbc.org/leed/rating-systems/existing-buildings>

ISO 14001 [http://www.iso.org/iso/iso\\_14000\\_essentials](http://www.iso.org/iso/iso_14000_essentials)

ISO 50001 <https://www.iso.org/iso-50001-energy-management.html>

Green Seal [www.green Seal.org](http://www.green Seal.org)

BOMA 360 [www.boma.org](http://www.boma.org)

### **Meeting and Event standards and tools:**

EIC Sustainable Event Standards

<https://insights.eventscouncil.org/Sustainability/Sustainability-Events-Standards>

<https://eventscouncil.org/Sustainability/CSE>

GRI Sustainable Meetings <https://www.globalreporting.org>

**Partnerships and Recognitions:**

USGBC Member [www.usgbc.org](http://www.usgbc.org)

Energy Star Partner  
[https://www.energystar.gov/buildings?s=](https://www.energystar.gov/buildings?s=mega)

[mega](https://www.energystar.gov/buildings?s=mega)

Waste Wise partner  
[www.epa.gov/wastewise](http://www.epa.gov/wastewise)

International Facility Managers Assoc. (IFMA) [www.ifma.org](http://www.ifma.org)

**Other:**

MIT Sloan Management Review Research Report Winter 2012,  
*Sustainability Nears a Tipping Point*, 2011 Sustainability & Innovation  
Global Executive Study and Research Project

**EPA WaterSense:**

<https://www.epa.gov/watersense>

<https://www.epa.gov/sustainability>

Adams, W.M. (2006). "The Future of Sustainability: Re-thinking  
Environment and Development in the Twenty-first Century."  
Report of the IUCN Renowned Thinkers Meeting, 29–31 January  
2006. Retrieved on: 2009-02-1.

**Articles:**

<https://venue.com/blog/5-strategies-creating-sustainable-events/>

<https://www.coliseum-online.com/state-farm-arena-zero-waste-accomplishments/>

<https://www.recyclingtoday.com/news/moda-center-portland-trail-blazers-oregon-introduces-ai-recycling-tech/>

<https://news.pollstar.com/2024/09/25/billie-eilish-shares-sustainability-plan-for-hit-me-hard-and-soft-the-tour/>

<https://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/2025/12/michigan-stadium-broke-multi-ton-recycling-world-record-during-game-in-2025-season.html>