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Environmental Consultants – When, why, and who

By Jeff Slye, CEO, Business Evolution Consulting

In this day in age, why would a hotel or hotel group not embrace and adopt a sincere environmental program? Typical answers include it costs too much money, quality of service will suffer, we don't know where to start, and we have other more pressing priorities. The good news is that all the above responses are misperceptions and there is nothing but bottom line and top line benefits that come from a well thought out and executed environmental program. Furthermore, an environmental program translates into cost savings, new revenue, and happier employees – some of the biggest priorities for any hotel. However, to achieve these outcomes it may be necessary to look outside of the hotel for support and resources. In this article we'll explore how engaging an environmental consultant may be the best option to remain focused on a hotel's core competency while adding business and social value in the process.

You can't start without "go"

As a prerequisite to any environmental effort, hotel management and executives must have a clear understanding of the business value of such a program (see article "Green means Green") and provide the support and sincere interest in undertaking such an effort. Without this backing, it doesn't matter if it is handled in-house or by a consultant, the effort will likely face many challenges and fail. When this support is available, compelling results are produced such as Marriott's ECHO (Environmentally Conscious Hospitality Operation), Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants national environmental program EarthCare, Hilton Vancouver's LEED Certification, Shangri-La's ISO 14001 certification (the international Environmental Management System standard), and Saunders Hotel Group EcoLogical Solutions.

Some of the measurable results that have been seen by one hotel group in less than 12 months include:

- 48,000 coat hangers recycled
- 81,000 oz of toxic cleaning supplies now natural cleaners
- Over 10,000 pounds of organic pesticide free coffee served
- Saved over $100,000 in costs from improved recycling and lower product costs
- Generated over $500,000 in new revenue.

When to engage a consultant

The most obvious sign is when there are 100 unread emails in your inbox, a stack of action items on your desk from last week, and your hotel has discussed and talked about getting an environmental program since the invention of the wake-up call. Additionally, for many hotels it is simply not possible to create, manage, and execute an environmental program while addressing everyday challenges such as occupancy, staffing, individual traveler problems, group business issues, sales and revenue figures, and equipment failures. Most hotels recognize the imminent need, from both the planet and business perspectives, to operate an environmentally responsible hotel. However, few have the internal resources to dedicate to this effort and that is when an environmental consultant can help.

Why use a consultant?

Market Knowledge

The environmental movement has been alive for decades, but only recently has it become infused into mainstream culture and purchasing decisions. As a result, hundreds and thousands of new "eco" vendors are emerging all hoping to take part in this socially conscious market estimated at $440 Billion (Environmental Business Journal (EBJ), 2003) and growing fast. In fact, the term "Green Washing" has emerged to describe businesses that are producing goods and services under the guise of being environmentally responsible, when in reality, they are not. As a result, there is a lot of confusion regarding which products and practices are truly environmentally friendly.

Furthermore, all hotels have differing levels of product quality standards to ensure these items are in alignment with their brand, message, and desired guest experience. Therefore, it is essential to understand which of those products can meet and exceed these quality standards and most hotels don't have the time and resources to do this investigation and research.

The last thing a hotel wants is a VIP guest biting into the organic chocolate provided at turndown to later call down to the front desk and ask why a package of dirt was left on his pillow!

Hidden Secrets

Consultants may also have insights into areas that may provide quick and easy ways to save money and positively impact the environment. These items may be hidden from view as hotels focus on their core business in running a high quality guest experience. One simple example, is the collecting and donating of unused soap amenity bottles to a local charity. This saves the hotel money on reducing the waste that these items would take up, reduces the need to produce more of these bottles as they are being reused, and provides a powerful contribution to the community.

Speed to Market

With the rapid growth of the environmental movement, there is a limited opportunity when being environmentally friendly can rapidly produce new business and marketing opportunities and ultimately customer loyalty. Within the decade it will be more the standard than the exception. Using a consultant is an excellent opportunity to get ahead of the curve and initiate a program that can take advantage of the current market opportunities and those in the future. This will be an important step as it will create a long term deeper customer connection as the entire market moves toward sustainability.

Limited investment

As with any consulting relationship, one of the greatest values of hiring an environmental consultant is that they may be engaged or disengaged at will and as needed. This limits the financial risk, provides an atmosphere to test and explore the relationship, and offers the freedom to determine the appropriate duration to have the consultant involved in the project.

Who to use?

Selecting the right environmental consultant is dependent on the direction and culture of the hotel or hotel group. Of course with any consultant, the key first step is to have an informational interview that not only validates their skills and abilities to suit your needs, but that there is also a fit with your style and business approach. It is never comfortable having a consultant in jeans and a flannel shirt surrounded by executives in power suits…or the other way around.

Some primary guidelines to consider include:

- **Culture fit:** As it is likely the consultant will be connecting with many different members and staff within a hotel, it is imperative they also fit with the hotels culture.
- **Understands your business:** This is a critical prerequisite. Imagine if your consultant wants to turn your hotel into an eco-lodge and you are trying to infuse sustainability to a 5 star hotel.
- **Listens intently to your future:** A consultant must clearly understand your vision as a business and help shape and create a sustainability effort that works in tandem with those goals and directives. This ensures the program's success and longevity.
- **Passionate:** Most likely this will be a fairly new effort and challenges and communication issues may arise within the hotel staff, management, etc. The consultant must have a deeper vision and passion to see that results are achieved and the goals of the program are met.
- **Market and sustainability knowledge:** This is a natural pre-requisite, but must come with the above criteria. Otherwise the consultant will be an excellent informational source, but unable to effectively connect, create, execute, and manage the sustainability program.

Do it now – it is costing you money!

Regardless of whether a consultant is engaged or not, each and every hotel should have an environmental program underway as it is good for business, doable, and fundamentally part of our duty to ensure a sustainable planet.

The answer to the question of whether to bring on board an environmental consultant will vary from hotel to hotel based on the unaddressed emails in the in-box and how high the papers are stacked alongside the desk. If there is not an environmental program in place already, in all likelihood a consultant may be the best option to get things going.

Regarding Return on Investment, a good consultant should have paid for himself within the first 6 months from the program's launch. In fact, this cost recovery may even come from waste savings alone! And 12 months after the start of the engagement, hotels should see a 5X multiplier or greater on that investment. With one of my clients, they have seen over $250,000 in new revenue from their program…and that is certainly a significant multiplier of our fees!

The time and opportunity is now, so get your sustainability program going and start saving money, generating new revenue, inspiring employees, connecting with guests, and putting a smile on the planet's face.

As the lead project manager and consultant for Kimpton Hotels and Restaurant's EarthCare environmental initiative, Jeff Slye has been instrumental in creating and executing the hospitality industry's most revered eco program. Mr. Slye founded Business Evolution Consulting to address the growing needs of organizations to become 'eco-friendly,' while continuing to reduce their costs and deliver high quality services and products. In combining his business background and commitment to the environment, he provides a powerful and unique perspective on environmental issues and objectives of organizations. Mr. Slye can be contacted at 415-871-1932 or jeff.slye@businessevolutionconsulting.com

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