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Best practices, insights & trends

When You Green It – Mean It: 5 Essentials for an Authentic Environmental Program

By Jeff Slye, CEO, Business Evolution Consulting

All across the country, hotels and their parent brands are talking about implementing or enhancing their environmental programs with more enthusiasm and passion than ever before. Not only has there been a tremendous influx of high-quality eco-products into the marketplace, but guests are becoming more sophisticated in their demands for a planet-friendly hotel. Eco, once considered to be an esoteric fringe lifestyle, has become part of the cultural mainstream and recent media reflects that trend. Compelling and extensive recent coverage in outlets such as Time, Vanity Fair, Elle, and Cameron Diaz's MTV show Trippin', have not only educated consumers on the urgency of doing our part, but has made it cool and sexy to care for the Earth.

So, what does it mean for hotels when consumers become more eco-savvy and have started to integrate planet-friendly practices into their own lives and homes? It means you had better "go green" or turn "green with envy" over your competitor's gain of market share you lost by not implementing an eco-program or enhancing your current one. Its 2006 and you can't try to pass off your 'towel and linen reuse' program from the 80's as your environmental initiative anymore - unless you want to be scoffed at.

Of course, the big question is "Can you actually execute a sincere environmental program without compromising your guest experience?" The answer is a resounding 'Yes!' With increased consumer awareness comes increased consumer demand. Step aside sand-paper toilet paper and grainy natural soap, a new legion of products have entered the marketplace that are high-quality, high-performing, and even quite hip.

Many hoteliers, from boutiques to international chains, have become pioneers of the hospitality industry by creating successful environmental programs that fully align with their brand. Their programs also produce trackable and compelling results, not only on their lessened environmental impact, but increased market share due to consumer demand for environmentally friendly products and services. A few shining examples include Fairmont Hotel's "Green Partnership Program," Marriott's "Environmentally Conscious Hospitality Operations (ECHO) program," Kimpton Hotels' "EarthCare Program," and Shangri-La's "Preserving Nature Program," which is one of the only ISO 14001 environmental certifications by the International Environmental Management System. There are also hundreds of examples of independent hotels, small chains, or meeting facilities that have successfully infused eco-practices such as Stanford Terrace Inn (CA), Lake Powell Resort (AZ), Strawberry Patch B&B (PA), and the Emory Conference Center Hotel (GA).

The theme of all of these programs is that each hotel or hotel group has created a program that benefits the environment and yet doesn't compromise their brand.

For your program to succeed, your eco-practices must fall within the context of your guest experience. My wife and I stayed in a 100% sustainable eco-lodge in Ecuador, the Black Sheep Inn, rated one of the top eco-lodges in the world by Outside magazine. While it was fascinating that one of the funky and colorful walls was made entirely of glass bottles and earth, we recognized that a feature like that would be a bit odd at the San Francisco Marriot. As a hotel executive, you need to determine what is feasible, cost-effective, and will work within the context of your brand.

The rule is - do not compromise your guest experience with your eco-program, but enhance your guest experience with your eco-program. There are actions and products that benefit the environment that match every star level of service offered – yes even 5 star.

So, how to get started on creating or enhancing your eco-program? After working with many hotels and business on their environmental programs, I have found there are five essential components for launching a sincere eco-program and for ensuring its ongoing success.

1: Start at the Top with a Management Champion

Having someone at the management level, either in the hotel or corporate office, support your eco-program is essential to its success. They don't need to do the heavy lifting, but their support and oversight plays a key roll in ensuring the creation, implementation, and communication all integrate effectively into the hotel's culture, both internally and externally. This person typically acts as the hotel spokesperson so it's essential they are well aware of the program elements and dynamics to address the increased media coverage that comes with environmental programs.

2: Find Your Passionate Champions

Your "Passionate Champions" are those who believe in protecting the environment and want to be part of the company's efforts in reducing their ecological footprint. They are your sources for innovative ideas, evaluators of new products and practices, and the ones who ultimately ensure your program succeeds. Your Passionate Champions team could also be responsible for creating the name of your program, essentially making it their creation.

As an example, Kimpton Hotels built a company-wide team of 51 eco-champions in 42 hotels, to create and own their EarthCare program. There are no seniority requirements to be an eco-champion; they simply must be interested and passionate about the environment. Kimpton receives weekly feedback from their eco-champions on opportunities, challenges, and improvements to the program.

STEP 3: Identify Program Practices

With management and internal support established, your program practices need to be defined. These can range from the simple, like replacing all break room napkins with a recycled version and Styrofoam cups with reusable and washable ceramic mugs, to the extreme such as demolishing hotels and rebuilding them as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified buildings.

Every action, no matter its size, makes a difference. Many hotels get discouraged if they are not doing myriad things. They think "why bother at all?" …but even if you're only doing three practices – that's three practices more than you were doing to benefit the planet and consumers will appreciate it.

The two most over looked places to find ideas are your employees and your guests. Take a company wide survey to see what practices your employees have incorporated at home or have seen in previous hotel jobs. Ask your best guests what they are doing to help the environment. You'll likely find that they aren't eco-extremists, but regular folks who have incorporated simple practices such as turning off their lights and replacing their chemical-laden cleaning products with non-toxic ones.

Your Passionate Champions can discuss and use the resulting ideas to shape your eco-program. By empowering them to create the program, it secures their support and enthusiasm. Your Passionate Champions themselves will also be a well-spring of ideas – after all, who interacts with the guests more?

One hotel I worked with was just getting their basic program off the ground when a front desk agent suggested that the company recycle all the coat hangers left in the room from their dry cleaning service. Now over 200,000 coat hangers are recycled yearly which would have been thrown away in our landfills - a huge difference for the planet that cost the hotels nothing. Such a simple idea and because it was born from the passion of the front lines, it was embraced that much quicker over 'another directive' from management.

Of course, with all great ideas come a few wacky ones. Such as the idea of asking guests share a room to save on electricity – good if there's a love connection, very bad if there isn't. Of course, the Management Champion always has final discretion of what to include or eliminate.

Once your potential practices have been identified, it is necessary to test and analyze these ideas to ensure the will work for your hotel. It is not only essential that the products have parity with the quality of your current amenities, but that your practices are fairly easy to implement, are ideally equal or less than in cost, and positively impact the environment.

Start with the easiest and fastest ideas first so that the program gains instant momentum and rapid support. If you are a larger hotel chain, you may want to ask a few of your hotels to beta test the practices first. If a smaller hotel, try out new ideas on one or two floors. Hotel Triton in San Francisco designated one floor as their Eco-Floor to determine if the guests noticed any difference with the energy efficient lighting, low-flow water systems, air purifier, recycling containers, and EO bath products. They noticed all right and their reaction was positive beyond belief. Guests started to request rooms on the Eco-Floor and as demand increased, the hotel expanded their program to all seven floors. In fact, in 2004 the hotel was selected as the "green model hotel" by the State of California.

At times, determining the value of each practice and sorting through the many options can be complex and beyond the capacities of your Passionate Champions. In this case, it may be worthwhile to engage a consultant or outside resource who can bring in their expertise and experience to streamline the process.

STEP 4: Operational Champion

While the Management Champion is the strategic-minded cheerleader for the program, the Operational Champion is the tactical mastermind. They facilitate the program's execution and process feedback from the Passionate Champions. This person could be someone within the company such as a "Sustainability Officer" or an outside environmental consultant such as Business Evolution Consulting.

The responsibilities of the Operational Champion vary dramatically depending on the scope of the effort and the direction management wants to take with their environmental program. There can be lots of excitement and passion around environmental programs. Therefore whether an internal

or external resource is used, the key role of the Operational Champion is to establish boundaries on the program's scope by evaluating the program's operational impact on the hotel, impact on the environment, impact on the hotel's bottom line, and impact to successfully attract new customers and gain market share. Their duties also include coordinating the program's internal and external communication, monitoring hotel compliance, testing and researching new products/practices, and supporting the hotel's marketing, sales, and PR efforts.

Relative to the Management and Passionate Champions, the Operational Champion will spend more hands on time on the project during the implementation phase which can take an average of 3 months to a year depending on the size of the hotel company. Therefore, hotels may be best served to hire an outside source to serve as the Operational Champion or to support the program roll out rather than shift the focus of one of their employees.

STEP 5: Communication

There are two steps in the communication process - first internal then external communication. I have seen too many companies create a wonderful program and in their excitement, promote it to the public while neglecting to first educate their employees fully - backfiring deleteriously. For example, let's say a guest finds a hotel on the internet. It looks appealing, but the deal-sealer is the hotel's eco-program called "Earth World" mentioned on the website. Upon check-in, the guest asks about Earth World and the desk agent has no idea what the guest is talking about. The perception by the guest, no matter how many great practices that hotel has in place, is that there really is no program, damaging both the hotel's credibility and the guest's loyalty and relationship to the hotel.

It is imperative to launch a communication plan that first ensures all employees from housekeepers to PBX operators know the name and details of your program. Create an easily repeatable talking point that captures the essence of your program. It could be as simple as "Earth World is our program to help preserve the environment by doing things such as serving you organic coffee, cleaning your room with non-toxic chemicals, and as you'll notice, offering recycling containers in your room."

Here are some ways to communicate your program internally:

- Hotel or company-wide newsletter
- Hotel or company-wide presentation
- Department based presentations
- Employee poster/signage
- Morning line-ups
- Including a program write-up with their paycheck
- Offer translations of the program in multiple languages

Now that your program is defined and has the appropriate internal support and awareness, it is ready to be broadcast to the world. This communication step is critical. Otherwise, how can you sway your guest to stay with you for all these great things you're doing for the environment over your competition who's not?

Here are some ways to communicate your program externally:

- Send an e-mail to your hotel guest database (obviously not a paper letter as that would be eco-unfriendly)
- Web site page
- Hotel signage (front desk, lobby, elevators, in-room, etc)

- Scripted verbal promotion at check-in
- Press releases
- Advertising and marketing
- Scripted verbal promotion for sales team
- Create a list of guests who are eco-enthusiasts – market to these individuals to become your word-of-mouth team

In conclusion, being environmentally responsible is simply the way to do business; it is no longer a specialty service or niche market. If your hotel doesn't have an eco-program in the near future, you'll lose the opportunity to tap into the rapidly expanding $227 billion market of socially responsible consumers.

The great news is that these programs, without fail, have been proven to be good for business by not only creating opportunities for new cost savings, but by creating new business opportunities. Lastly we can't forget the most important and immeasurable positive impact these hotels are making for all of us, our children, and our grand children to enjoy a planet that is sustainable and safe. Your guests will sleep easy knowing they're making such a difference just by staying with you.

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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