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Sustainability on Stage at BITAC

Suppliers are stepping up their green game. Here's what they're doing.

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When a potential client sits down with Joe Adcox to look at the meeting tables, banquet tables and stages that Southern Aluminum provides, the first page in the binder is labeled: "Thinking Green... Every day."

It immediately tells the buyer that the products contain 45 percent recycled content and that the products are 100 percent recyclable when they end their useful life, said Adcox, hospitality market manager.

The idea that a product should be environmentally sustainable -- and that hoteliers and designers specifically want this information -- is relatively new. But it's one that suppliers should understand and adapt to immediately.

That was the consensus of a panel of experts at the sold-out Buyer Interactive Trade Alliance and Conference (BITAC) International Luxury event at the Fontainebleau Miami Beach. The event was up 22 percent in attendance this year and focused on providing luxury hoteliers with strategies to embrace sustainability and going green without interfering with guest comfort.

"I'm going to submit that if you don't get on green bandwagon in next five years, you may be updating your resume," said Gene Faul, CEO of Cypress Hotel and Spa. "It's a pretty bold statement, but I'm saying it."

According to a real-time, electronic poll of the audience, 43 percent of suppliers said they automatically include green information with their products, and 37 percent reported they provided it only when asked. The rest never provide it or have even thought about the subject.

But nearly three-quarters of the audience said that buyers are asking more sophisticated questions about green products and services.

Faul's company manufactures luxury bed and bath linens, including the Green Earth towel that need less water, detergent and drying time to launder. Faul said he presents potential clients with a CD that explains green process starting from the mill in Indiana.

"We go the extra mile to let you know what you do," he said.

Ray Burger, president of Pineapple Hospitality, said all suppliers should make this a part of their presentations. He said it's something his company considers when deciding which products his company will represent.

"We always look at three things: Is it equal to or greater than in guest satisfaction, does it have positive impact financially, and does it have a measurable and tangible environmental benefit?" he said. "If it meets those three tests, we are interested in bringing it to the lodging market. If it fails one, it is not the right product."



Steve Tipton, vice president of Simmons Hospitality Group, said Simmons uses soy-based urethane foam in a substantial number of its projects. But he noted only about 18 percent of the finished product could have that soy-based foam before performance would start to suffer.

"There's room for improvement," he said, "but we've taken it to the very limit that technology will allow us today."

Simmons also has changed its internal practices to not only produce earth-friendly products, but become a greener business internally. Tipton said the company has a "zero-waste proposition" in its plants so everything is recycled, from steel and wood scraps to paper, foam or any waste product. Its new facilities use skylights to take advantage of natural light.

Tipton said suppliers only hurt themselves by not publicizing their environmental efforts.

"It's kind of like winking at a beautiful woman in the dark," he said. "You know it but no one else knows it. If you don't tell your story or be a crusader in the cause, no one will know."

Their hotel clients, on the other hand, can decide for themselves how best to share their eco programs with guests. John Tavares, vice president of marketing at INNCOM, said his products allow guests to decide their own level of eco-involvement. INNCOM develops energy management and integrated room automation systems, including a thermostat that includes a green button guests can push to indicate they want to participate in energy-saving programs. For instance, instead of adjusting the room temperature by 5 degrees when a guest leaves, it would be adjusted by 6 degrees. Or the lights could come on at 80 percent of the typical brightness. This opt-in system serves the green-minded guest without alienating guests who do not want to address these issues, Tavares said.

"We're all about providing the means for you to become an energy efficient lodging establishment without inconveniencing your guests," he said. "If you can do that it's a win-win for everybody."

What's more, Tavares noted that it's important for suppliers to start making these changes to avoid losing business later. One of his clients told him that the hotel would lose a convention that brought in about \$250,000 in business if the hotel could not demonstrate in real numbers how it was becoming greener each year.

"There is a growing number of the traveling public that really expects the lodging industry to behave responsibly," he said. "If they don't see that, they will take their business elsewhere."

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Bio: Beth Kormanik is managing editor of Buyer Interactive and editor of Hotel Interactive. She previously covered politics, government and higher education for the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville, Fla. While at the Times-Union she won several state and regional awards, including the 2008 Freedom of Information award from the Florida Society of News Editors and the top honor in the 2007 Florida Bar media awards for large newspapers. Beth also was a ... [more](#)