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**A GREENER COURSE
GOLD MEETINGS****EXPANDING SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AT GOLF PROPERTIES POINT TO A
CHANGING DEFINITION OF GREEN MEETINGS**

Jandie Turner had organized a golfing event for a client who wanted to find ways to make the event a bit more green. Turner, the CEO of Baltimore, MD-based event management firm Acuity Sports, had found such tactics as placing recycling bins near each hole and using courses that used greywater (wastewater that can be reused for landscaping purposes) for their irrigation to be effective in the past. But it occurred to her that one source of waste that she had never tackled at a sustainable golf event was the scorecards themselves.

"We reached out to this group called eGolfCard and they set it up so you don't use cards at all, but recycled Blackberrys," says Turner. "These are old models that aren't on the market anymore, but we got a lot of use out of them as electronic scorecards -- and didn't have to throw anything out at the end of the day."

Turner's example reflects the changing landscape of sustainable golf, as properties and planners have found new ways to add ecofriendly elements to golf events. Often, adding a green component to a golf tournament can be as simple as asking if something can be done. As planners have more fully embraced sustainability when devising a meeting program, properties have moved to meet this demand. This is particularly evident at golf resorts, where a growing list of properties is beginning to implement eco-friendly policies and designs.

Raising the Green Golf Standard

As demand for green offerings on golf courses has grown, the definition has also evolved, with both planners and properties approaching sustainability in more comprehensive, strategic terms.

"You have to get the people who make the decisions to understand the importance of sustainability and look at it as an overall strategy -- you can't tack it on," says Geraldine Gatehouse, an independent sustainable meeting planner as well as a CSR columnist for Successful Meetings' sister publication Incentive.

Along these lines, Gatehouse recommends seeking out golfing venues that make sustainability central to their identity, which will help ensure that the sustainable aspects of the event are not simply bolted on at the end, but are deeply ingrained in the property's approach to meetings and events.

For example, in April of this year, the Grand Del Mar in San Diego, announced an aggressive new composting program aimed at minimizing its landfill contributions, a fuel-recycling program, and a program to recycle green waste from the property's Tom Fazio-designed Grand Golf Club. Just five years old, the property had made sustainability central to its offerings from its earliest planning stages.

"Because we are using organic materials and sustainable processes throughout our property, buildings, and golf courses, our guests can rest assured that the footprint they are leaving behind is minimal," says David Yanez, director of agronomy for the Grand Del Mar's golf club. Working with Allied Waste, it has been recycling 93 tons of grass clippings, brush, and other "green waste" materials per month. This has cut down on the property's disposal costs, with expenses for green waste approximately one quarter the cost of standard trash, savings that can then be passed on to meetings groups.

Besides the golf course itself, the Grand Del Mar offers a number of outdoor spaces, such as the nearly 8,200-square-foot Aria Lawn, where groups can hold a reception with views of the course.

The Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort and Spa, just outside of Austin, has more than 60,000 square feet available for events, including two ballrooms measuring 16,000 and 7,000 square feet. But one of its biggest draws for groups is the 18-hole Wolfdancer Golf Club, including a 13-acre practice area and learning center.

Last year, the course received certification from the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf -- the industry standard for sustainable golf courses. Courses looking to receive certification undergo a site assessment from Audubon International, which offers the property guidance and education on their chemical use reduction and safety, water conservation, water quality management, environmental planning, as well as wildlife and habitat management.

They then develop a plan specific to the course and its natural surroundings and document the environmental management practices taken. Those that achieve the standards receive certification. The organization currently lists more than 800 certified properties on its website, which can be searched at www.auduboninternational.org/acsp-golf-certified.

"The Audubon International certification is a wonderful talking point and value add," says Kim Britton, director of sales and marketing for Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort and Spa. "More and more people are asking questions about sustainability when it comes to their meetings and events. Having that certification for Wolfdancer -- as well as the resort having a four key rating from the Green Key Eco-Rating program -- gives people a better feeling about Hyatt Lost Pines."

While the definition of sustainability for certifications like Audubon is often based primarily on environmental grounds, some experts believe that golf sustainability can be monitored even

more broadly.

The International Sustainability Council (ISC), a nonprofit organization focused on expanding sustainable practices in many areas including home, work, and the hospitality sector, recently launched a series of certification programs, including one specifically for golf courses.

Operated in conjunction with the Audubon Lifestyle program, the Sustainable Golf Facility Program asks properties to take their green golf efforts a few steps further, adopting a more holistic approach to sustainability to include economic and social impact.

"When most people are talking about sustainability they are really talking about the old word 'conservation' or 'environmental stewardship,' but that's not all sustainability is as far as I'm concerned," says Ron Dodson, chairman of the International Sustainability Council.

He defines the word much more broadly to incorporate three factors: economic viability, ensuring that any practices can be continued without heavily costing a property; environmental management like that outlined in the Audubon standards; and long-term social benefits.

"If golf facilities are merely thinking about things like 'I need to reduce the amount of water I use because it looks good to the general public,' that's only taking a very thin look at the topic of water," says Dodson. "The overuse of water can cause all kinds of other issues, like grass problems and fungal problems and damaging the property from the perspective of golfer expectations on the course."

After thorough review, the ISC sustainable golf program awards properties between one and five stars depending on their level of sustainability. The very first recipient of the Seal of Sustainability was the PGA Golf Village in Port St. Lucie, FL, awarded in November of this year. With 54 holes of championship golf, and a 35-acre PGA Center for Golf Learning, the property earned a three-star ISC rating.

In addition to Audubon and ISC, Dodson points to the Global Environmental Organization as a group that can be trusted as far as its certification designations.

Planner Priorities

Planners agree that when trying to put together a sustainable golf event, it is crucial to integrate "green" into the program from the start.

"Picking the venue is the most important priority -- they control things like how the waste is organized and disposed of at the end of the event, and any kind of energy uses," says Diana Connolly, owner of San Rafael, CA-based Groundswell Marketing. "It's where you spend the most money and have the most impact."

Connolly has found that the biggest difference often comes down to just making the formal request for the event to include sustainable offerings. She gives the example of a recent event for 4,000 attendees where a venue partner had planned to contain food in plastic clamshell containers that could not be recycled.

It turned out upon asking that a more eco-friendly option was available and at no additional cost to the client.

For all golf tournaments and events, Connolly calls plastic water bottles "public enemy number one" and says planners should work to set up water stations where attendees can

drink using biodegradable cups or preferably their own refillable bottles. These can be brought by the attendees themselves (helping encourage individuals to personally make an environmentally conscious move), or recyclable ones can be provided to be used during the event.

"If it's going to have your logo on it, you want this to be something that is going to be used again and again," says Vanessa Ferragut, founder and senior event planner for Ferragut Event Group, based in Washington, D.C., about reusable water bottles.

She recommends staying away from plastic and when using aluminum promotional products, avoiding those with the chemical compound Bisphenol A (BPA). A golf-appropriate giveaway she has used in the past consisted of branded copies of the Zagat book of America's Top Golf Courses.

"Who doesn't love having a Zagat book? Make it a useful item, not something they will use for a day and throw out," says Ferragut.

As far as the other concerns that should be top of mind for meeting planners seeking sustainable golf events, Ferragut suggests that if the property does not have an extensive recycling or composting program, that the planner request one can be implemented.

Similarly, catering should be locally sourced if possible, with free-range meats, and if this can't be arranged by the property itself, it may be worth exploring whether an outside caterer can be brought in to provide it.

Molly Walsh, vice president of business development for San Francisco-based Key Events, points to La Costa Resort & Spa in Carlsbad, CA, which recently renovated its entire golf course, reducing the amount of turf that must be maintained and adding native grasses and lakes to make the course both more sustainable and more challenging for players.

"Everything about it is new -- they changed their landscaping and the way they were draining," says Walsh. "In Southern California, it's particularly important that the water is being conserved."

She adds that "it's a legitimately hard course -- not just that it's green, but one that takes skill."

In all of these efforts, it is important also to inform the attendees of the course's green practices or the ways that waste is being reduced at the event.

"If I'm at a facility and we do anything sustainable, I try to include a little sign -- maybe placing them throughout the course saying, 'this course saves this much energy or uses this much reclaimed water,'" says Acuity Sports' Turner. "If there are consistent things that the venue does that we can build awareness about, it is an added benefit for the property and attendees."

Part of the Habitat

One of the priorities for many sustainable courses is to make the golf course blend in to the surrounding natural habitat. At Hyatt Lost Pines, the course is nestled in McKinney Roughs Nature Park, a 1,100-acre park where visitors can explore the flora and fauna of four natural ecosystems: Post Oak Savannah, Blackland Prairie, East Texas Piney Woods, and a riparian zone.

"One of the neat things about our resort property and golf course is that there is a natural

corridor that winds through it. That corridor inspired and played into the layout of the Wolfdancer course, which truly took its cues from the land," says Britton.

Including this type of half-day outdoor activity into a golf meeting offers a richer way to experience the destination while giving attendees a deeper appreciation of the wider ecosystem that the golf course's sustainable practices help to maintain.

One property Gatehouse cites as particularly responsible is Carmel Valley Ranch in Monterey, CA, which has an 18-hole course designed by Pete Dye set in the foothills of a 500-acre ranch. The course showcases the surrounding nature and wildlife, with holes winding through vineyards and old-growth oak groves.

"They encourage the natural habitat, planting things like lavender on the course that encourage bees, hummingbirds, and natural cross-pollination," says Gatehouse.

Beyond holding their meetings at sustainable courses, planners can also consider adding a social responsibility component to the events themselves. For example, some planners suggest turning a round of golf into a charity golf tournament, where each team can select a nonprofit organization to play for, with the winning team getting a donation, and the losing ones getting a slightly smaller donation.

"You could set up a system where they're betting and they donate the winnings to a local nonprofit," says Gatehouse.

She adds that a company might partner with an organization that offers golf clinics to children, maybe setting up a putting course where kids could have the opportunity to learn a few golfing basics, which the meeting attendees could help out with if they so chose. This would help the kids try a new activity and for the meeting attendees to take part in corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Ferragut agrees. "If you want to talk about CSR, you can have the company partner with a nonprofit that's maybe helping children with a class for golfers or something along that line," she says. "You're breeding the next generation of golfers and giving back to the community." SM Questions or comments? Email alex@alexpalmerwrites.com

MORE ONLINE

Review the U.S. Golf Association checklist on sustainable courses at bit.ly/smUSGAGreen

[Fairmont's Sustainable Commitment](#)

Few properties are as identified with their surroundings as the Fairmont Banff Springs. "We have an 80-year-old course and see ourselves as stewards of the course more than anything," says Justin Wood, Fairmont's executive director of golf. "If we have to cut down trees, we bring in someone from the game and fish department and it becomes a combination of three or four agencies working to protect the course but also to allow people to enjoy it."

He points out that the Banff Springs area gets as many as 4 million visitors a year for hiking and other outdoor activities in addition to golf. Efforts to ensure the golf course is sustainable are connected with the need to be sure visitors and meetings groups can continue to enjoy its offerings long into the future.

All Fairmont-managed golf courses are enrolled with Audubon, as part of the company's "Greening our Greens" initiative that it launched in 2008. Wood points to the use of gray

water for irrigation and biofuels for the equipment as a few standard policies across Fairmont properties.

"We try to focus on all areas of conservation -- not just water, but chemical applications and the impact it has on animals," says Wood. "We make it more of a mindset than a program."

La Costa Resort & Spa recently renovated its golf course, adding native grasses and lakes to make a more sustainable, and challenging, course

The Wolfdancer Golf Club, at the Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort and Spa, is certified by the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf

The PGA Golf Village in Port St. Lucie, FL is the first property to earn an ISC rating for sustainability

The Carmel Valley Ranch showcases the striking natural surroundings of its golf course

The golf course at the Fairmont Chateau Whistler Resort is maintained with careful consideration of its impact on the wider environment

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By Alex Palmer

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