The Eco-Friendly Evolution

Around the world, the eco-friendly movement is galvanizing consumers and companies to reduce, reuse and recycle. These initiatives are nothing new—Earth Day was first celebrated in 1970 and the Don’t Mess With Texas catchphrase came out in 1985 for the iconic anti-littering campaign—but the movement continues to gather momentum and has become a way of life for many. Many promotional products companies are launching initiatives to respond to and support this movement.

Company Initiatives

One such company is New Kensington, Pennsylvania-based Polyconcept North America, parent company of suppliers Bullet, JournalBooks and Leed’s. This past summer the company refreshed its EcoSmart program, established more than 10 years ago, to offer more than 50 items constructed of recycled materials. PCNA is also one of several industry companies, along with apparel suppliers Vantage Apparel and Storm Creek, that has aligned with 1% For The Planet, an organization with a mission to build an alliance of businesses financially committed to creating a healthier planet. PCNA has agreed to donate one percent of sales from all EcoSmart products directly to environmental nonprofits.

Liz Haesler, PCNA chief merchandising officer, says PCNA has seen an increased demand for EcoSmart products despite the belief that eco-friendly products are more expensive. “From a bags standpoint, we have a good, better
and best approach,” she says. “We’re trying to make sure we’ve got options at all price points.”

But EcoSmart is about more than just products, says AJ Dickson, PCNA global category director. “As a company, we responsibly source and responsibly manufacture our products, and we take great care with the selection of our vendors. EcoSmart is a movement within the company. It’s how we source, manufacture, package and ship product. It’s going to be an evolution.”

This eco-friendly evolution offers an opportunity for distributors who want to make some green by selling green. “People want to work for companies that care about the environment and give back,” Dickson says. “The opportunity for distributors is to align with that message. It makes good business sense for distributors to have that as part of their offering.”

Packaging is an element that goes hand-in-hand with products and has recently come under fire from consumers because of the excess inherent in all kinds of products from cosmetics to toys. It’s in eco-friendly packaging where Norwood, New Jersey-based supplier AAA Innovations is trying to make a big difference. Through an upcoming initiative called Bag the Plastic, the company is eliminating the plastic bags and nylon sleeves that come with their umbrellas.

“Umbrellas from most companies usually come in plastic bags,” says Jeff Nanus, president of AAA Innovations. “Many umbrellas also have a nylon or polyester sleeve that no one ever uses. The polyester sleeve also comes in a plastic bag. That all goes in the garbage.”

AAA Innovations is eliminating all the plastic packaging on their umbrellas. “We have replaced that with a biodegradable Kraft paper sleeve that looks like a gift bag,” Nanus says. “On one side of the bag there will be an eco-friendly message. The other side of the bag will be left blank for the end user to print whatever eco-friendly message they want.”

Nanus says the new umbrellas, to be introduced at The PPAI Expo in January 2020, will be offered at the same price point. “We looked at what we could do to make a big difference without raising our price and still help the end user accomplish their goals,” he adds.

While the initiative will start with AAA’s umbrella packaging, the plan is to begin eliminating excess packaging on their bags and possibly other products in the line. “Our canvas bags will be next, and one by one they’ll all go,” Nanus says.

The inspiration for the Bag the Plastic initiative came from outside the industry after Nanus read an article about how the toy company Hasbro is attempting to reduce the foam and plastic used in its packaging. “I think we’ll start the trend, and within a short amount of time many suppliers will follow us,” he says. “They’ll look at their business and realize it just makes sense.”
Along with the movement to reduce, reuse and recycle, consumers and companies are rethinking many of the products they use to lessen the amount of trash that eventually finds its way into landfills. Plastic straws and single-use plastic bags, of course, are some of the high-profile items being replaced, but for professional meeting organizers everything is fair game when working to reduce landfill waste at conferences, conventions and meetings of all sizes. A recent article in Convene magazine outlined some smart practices for reducing waste, such as not putting registration materials inside an envelope and providing all handouts online instead of in print.

**Eco-Friendly Materials 101**

Interest in eco-friendly products has never been greater. This demand is coming from a changing culture where plastic waste reduction is celebrated and laws banning single-use plastics are popping up in countries all over the globe.

In response to this planet-conscious movement, industry suppliers have reaffirmed their commitment to serving the needs of buyers with more eco-friendly product offerings. Here’s a quick primer on some of the terms associated with products in this category.

**Recycled PET**

Polyethylene terephthalate, or PET, is the most common type of plastic used for water and soft drink bottles, and food containers such as peanut butter jars and household cleaners. PET is the most recycled plastic in the world. Used PET containers are sorted, cleaned and ground into pellets that are reintroduced into the manufacturing process.
Bamboo
Bamboo is a strong and fast-growing resource. Bamboo trees grow to maturity in only three years, so they require fewer natural resources such as water than other types of trees. Bamboo is not only 100-percent biodegradable, it is highly renewable because it is easy to plant and harvest.

Wheat Straw
Wheat straw is the stalk that’s left over after wheat grains are harvested. Traditionally, it has been treated as a waste. However, these stalks can be reclaimed and used to make eco-friendly products. Wheat straw is durable enough to become the barrel of a pen or even a lunch box.
Recycled Cotton

When dumped in landfills, textile waste can take hundreds of years to decompose. Fortunately, the leftover cuttings from apparel and textile factories can be recycled and used to make products like tote bags and notebooks. Producing a cotton tote using existing materials that would otherwise be thrown away helps reduce CO2 and fossil fuel emissions into the environment.

Source: Polyconcept North America

12 Ways Conference Pros Are Creating Waste-Free Meetings

The Australian Marine Sciences Association and event management organization Encanta created a near plastic-free annual conference this past July in Fremantle, Australia, and then developed these tips to help other organizations do the same. Their tips should whet suppliers’ and distributors’ imaginations for ways they can better serve eco-minded meetings and hospitality industry clients.

1. Stiff cardboard name badges with no plastic pockets
2. Bamboo lanyards with metal clips (for name badges)
3. 100-percent jute/cotton conference bags (can be repurposed as shopping bags)
4. Option to pre-purchase a cup with an AMSA logo
5. Espresso coffee carts with returnable cups that were washed and returned fresh each day
6. Water jugs with glassware (or to refill personal water bottles)
7. No packaged mints
8. Sustainably sourced pencils and sharpening stations
9. Printed pocket program for daily use
10. Reusable plates, silverware and glassware
11. Delegates were asked to bring their own reusable water bottles and coffee cups
12. Dates were omitted from new banners for reuse at subsequent events

Source: Convene magazine, the publication of Professional Conference Management Association.

Brittany Glenn “The Eco-Friendly Evolution” PPB Dec. 1 2019