

Going green

Green practices and solutions are rapidly becoming basic criteria in the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions industry.

According to the German Convention Bureau's (GCB) report titled "Meetings and Conventions 2030: A study of megatrends shaping our industry", sustainable development will become an important quality factor and criterion in choosing convention and meeting locations. In addition, certifications and rankings will become even more important in influencing the success of destinations.

Green Building Index

When it comes to going green, there are both active solutions, which depend on the conference organisers, and passive ones, which incorporate the design and architectural aspects of the building.

For architects Dr Tan Loke Mun and Boon Chee Wee, both former presidents of the Malaysian Institute of Architects (also known as Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia, PAM), the Green Building Index (GBI) could serve as a template for putting passive solutions into play.

"There are three types of buildings that are considered high energy guzzlers: shopping malls, convention centres and data centres," explains Tan, who is also a partner at architecture firm ArchiCentre Sdn Bhd.

The GBI is a green certification rating designed by PAM for Malaysia's tropical climate and current social, infrastructural and economic development. For a building to be GBI-certified, several basic criteria have to be taken into consideration: its energy efficiency and water usage as well as the location and use of material and resources.

"The thing about convention centres is that you probably use an equal amount of time and energy for preparation and setting up as you would for the event itself. But you shouldn't need that kind of comfort level when preparing for an event or packing up."

Typically, cooling a conference area uses up the most energy. Convention centres in cold climates get



Tan: The GBI gives you a template to handle the heat, humidity and people

around this by using the cool air from the external environment, Tan says.

"However, it's constantly hot and wet in Malaysia, and when you bring masses of people in, they generate even more heat and vapour," he says.

"Letting that space heat up at night and chilling it the next morning is worse than keeping it generally chilled," Tan continues. "So this is where the GBI gives you a template to handle the heat, humidity and the people."

While convention centres may be structured or designed differently from regular office towers or commercial buildings, Tan says the same principles apply when it comes to lowering internal temperatures.

"For example, you wouldn't allow halogen lights because they generate heat. You also try to minimise the size of your openings. Insulate the roof because it's very large, so 60% to 70% of the heat gain will be cut out," says Tan.

"You can harness daylight but you don't want to bring in the heat, so use the right type of glass, either double glazed or low-emissivity (low-e) glass."

In Malaysia, convention centres used to be chilled to a temperature of 22°C. When the GBI was introduced, however, this was raised to 25°C. Tan also notes that in chilling large meeting rooms, air should be blown from the bottom half of the room, since people hardly occupy spaces above.



Wong: You have to think long term

"You don't have to cool the entire volume of space, as people only occupy about one fifth of [a convention centre's] volume of space," he says, adding that if you chilled the room from above, you'd have to overcome the heat produced by the lights. This could use two to three times more energy.

Apart from energy usage, conferences also employ large quantities of water, from the kitchen to the toilets.

"If you take 10,000 people attending a conference in one day, and multiply that with one half-flush of three litres of water per person, you can calculate the volume of water used during a conference," says Tan. "This excludes the water used to clean up after the event."

Another aspect to the GBI is that developers should also focus on the indoor environmental quality. Besides the temperature, daylight and fresh air is just as important.

"While temperate countries can flush the air [from outside] into the building, we can't because our air is high in humidity," says Boon. "Since conferences are lengthy affairs, convention centres would look for avenues that provide fresh air and daylight [for participants] during breakout times. But you'd have to moderate the building's design [when it comes to allowing daylight in], because you don't want the daylight to contribute to the heat."



Boon: Ban the use of all Styrofoam, and reduce the use of plastic cups and bags

Pro-active solutions

While passive solutions play a large role in cutting down on a conference's carbon footprint, Anthony Wong of Asian Overland Services (AOS) Tourism & Hospitality group believes green initiatives can also be proactive, beginning with education.

"When you talk about sustainability, it should start with education," says the group managing director.

"Hospitality or tourism leaves the biggest carbon footprint; hotels, for example, have many people coming in and out. Yet the basic hospitality course does not include sustainability. When you start off in hospitality, they should teach you how to reduce energy, water waste as well as how to recycle. You should also have to learn design, as part of greening is in the design and material used."

Wong's own company engages in educational initiatives by raising awareness among schools and other event management companies on green measures they can undertake. He is also developing a Master's programme with Universiti Utara Malaysia on sustainable tourism.

Wong walks his talk. His Frangipani Langkawi Resort & Spa under the AOS group is an example of a green facility. This year, he is looking to cut down the hotel's energy bill by 40% by retrofitting the hotel. It also harvests rainwater, saving between RM8,000 and RM12,000 in its water bills every

month. When he spent RM250,000 on solar panels, people thought he was mad. But Wong says he made back his investment in three and a half years.

"You have to think long term," he points out.

In addition, the hotel has zero discharge of waste water because all effluents are converted to clean water using special treatment systems.

Conferences could also afford to cut down on garbage or material waste. Buntings are environmentally costly items as they can only be used once for a specific occasion. Electronic signboards work just as well, says Wong, but if you do use buntings, they can be converted into bags, so they do not go to waste.

"We advocate other industry players to send their banners and buntings to a particular organisation that uses paid prison labour to turn them into fashionable bags," he says. "We tell people to use recycled bags instead of making new ones [for the door gifts]. Keep it simple and don't produce too many things."

Boon concurs, saying that if items have to be produced for a conference, they should be at least reusable.

"Try not to use Styrofoam, for one. Operators of convention centres can actually ban all Styrofoam because it's not biodegradable. Reduce plastic cups and bags. With these things, operators have to comply and commit," he opines.

Oftentimes, social norms and cultural perceptions become barriers to green measures and sustainable efforts too.

"We've attended international conferences before where lunch is just an apple or sandwich, with no wrapping or plates to wash," says Boon. "But we might not think that we'd be getting our money's worth [if we did that]."

Tan adds that it would also help if conference attendees were allowed to wear attire more suited to Malaysia's climate, instead of a full suit.

"When we were in Tokyo, people were wearing short-sleeved shirts, and you don't have to bother with a jacket because it isn't freezing indoors. Whereas in Malaysia, even foreign delegates complain that it's colder than their own country." **E**