

# COVID-19 MAKES AN IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

A focus on sustainability was a significant trend in the trade show industry entering 2020, and then COVID-19 hit.

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The year 2020 was a year like no other. Worldwide lockdowns resulted in personal reflection for many and economic uncertainty. Environmental experts contended that while it was a virus that wreaked chaos in society this time, an extreme weather event could very well be next.

Although many associate the word “sustainability” with reducing energy use and diverting waste, it is much more involved, with health and safety front-and-center.

“COVID-19 will undoubtedly have an impact on the trade show industry’s progress in sustainability and waste reduction. As we recover and return to business, there could be a greater reliance on materials at large, including personal protection equipment (PPE), graphics and catering provisions,” said Lacey Gautier, Group Show Director at New Hope Network, a division of



Informa and Show Director of Natural Products Expo. “The financial impacts resulting from COVID-19 may also have an impact on the extent to which shows will be able to prioritize sourcing more sustainable alternatives, offsetting travel and energy/water consumption, and

investing in the necessary infrastructures to divert waste properly. For these reasons and many more, we must double down on our collective efforts and stay committed to the pursuit of innovative, cost-effective measures to reduce the environmental impact of events. In the



**Top: Sorting it Out.** Back-of-house recycling efforts at 2019 Greenbuild Conference in Atlanta.

**Above: Offsetting Carbon Impact.** Natural Products Expo focuses on carbon offsetting.

**Right: Pilot Program Impresses.** Venetian recycles face masks.

case of Natural Products, we'll continue to identify sponsorship and thought leadership opportunities to offset the costs incurred by keeping sustainability on the top of our priority list."

Informa believes a sustainable event is composed of three components: environmental responsibility, social responsibility and fostering sustainable development in the industries it serves.

"Even throughout COVID, concerns and interest in sustainability issues have grown. This presents great opportunities to foster sustainable development, grow our audiences and help them find solutions to sustainability challenges in their own industries. That said, COVID-19 presents challenges for live events in



terms of waste. Some of the enhanced safety measures that will now become best practices at in-person events — like PPE, dividers and single-serve food packaging — generate more waste that is difficult to divert. However, I don't believe these challenges are insurmountable. As it relates to Greenbuild, we typically divert over 90% of the show's waste, and we're already working in collaboration with our vendors and venues on cre-

ative solutions for the 2021 event," said Sherida Sessa, Brand Director, Greenbuild International Conference + Expo, Informa Connect. "I also think it's important to remember that while 2020 may have given us social distancing and PPE, it also has pushed critical topics like social equity, diversity and even renewable energy to the forefront in a positive way. And all of these issues play a role in sustainable events with more people are



**What We're Made Of.** IMEX materials have a past and future.

talking about them, advocating for them and acting on them than ever before, which is so encouraging for our future.”

On the plus side, the pandemic has helped accelerate the adoption of technology, such as touchless registration, in a more systemic way.

“These digital offerings help to reduce onsite waste while also making content accessible to a broader audience, without travel, which greatly reduces our carbon footprint,” added Sessa.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends avoiding the use of some reusables such as menus, condiments and food containers. Instead, it urges the use of single-serve condiments and disposable food service items, which will end up in landfills, not an ideal scenario for the planet.

Another new issue to contend with are discarded disposable face masks and plastic gloves. The Venetian Resort in Las Vegas is expanding its Sands ECO360 recycling efforts as a result. Said to be the first Las Vegas-based



property and one of the first in the nation to develop such a program, The Venetian will collect discarded face masks on site to send to a recycling facility where they are separated, shredded and densified into a crumb-like raw material used to make repurposed products like composite lumber for ship-

ping pallets, railroad ties and composite decking. Last year, The Venetian recycled over 6,800 pounds of masks.

**Where There is A Will, There Is A Way**

Carina Bauer, CEO of the IMEX Group — the organization that puts on



**Greenbuild Volunteers.** Students help ensure the right items get in the right bins.



**IMEX Discovery Zone.** Focuses on the power of "What if?"

two worldwide exhibitions for incentive travel, meetings and events each year — agrees that single-use plastic has gained popularity during the pandemic, but she is not willing to concede to their ongoing use.

“We are actively looking for products that are individually wrapped but are not single-use plastic — materials that can then be regenerated and recycled. It’s incumbent on all of us to find these materials, plus if there is more of a demand, costs come down for everybody,” she said.

For example, after years of trying, IMEX was finally able to find carpet made of recycled materials that was itself recyclable. “Now that we are using it, it was offered to other organizers, and the cost has come down,” she explained. “As an industry, it’s really important we demand these types of products if we are going to reduce our impact. Single-use plastic is definitely a big one for us to all watch out for in this new health and safety world that we’re living in.”

Kenji Haroutunian, Trade Show Director at The Big Gear Show, agrees that there are opposing forces in play. “On the one side, there will definitely be more single-use plastic and individually wrapped packaging for distribution at events as hygiene and minimizing transmission help to bring events back to life,” he said. “The crosscut trend to that is the opportunity for reset; the idea that for show producers, now is the time for reimagining how sustain-

able processes are folded in, such as how food and beverage is handled, how waste is processed, and what kind of innovative products and solutions can be utilized.”

Examples include touchless registration and dictated traffic patterns both on show floors and to/from events themselves. The prediction that regional events will swell and national/international events will ramp up more slowly is one Haroutunian believes is accurate and will result in less carbon impact.

“In general, the short-term impact will be a swell in waste and single-use plastic, which is unfortunate. For the events that I’m working on, we are keeping vigilant on sustainability investments and features even as we may need more plastic sheeting, single-use bottles and other items like disposable gloves and PPE. I’m hopeful that the industry will continue to invest in greening, less impactful travel options and innovative technologies to minimize the waste stream as we go back to gathering in numbers,” Haroutunian concluded.

Environmentally sustainable trade shows don’t just happen. There are proactive steps that are put in place for a gathering to become green — training is one of them. “As a company that stands behind sustainable practices, we have trained our teams on the fine points of waste diversion. This helps our partners and trade show management meet and exceed their goals,” said Richard

A. Simon, whose company, United Service Companies (USC), has serviced Greenbuild and other shows which are awarded sustainability recognition consistently. “We recognize and celebrate the importance of sustainable cleaning practices and materials, but because of the nature of trade shows, a serious concentration on waste diversion is critical to meeting carbon-neutral goals. This should be an essential component of every show as we look to adapt and be good stewards of our industry.” (USC is the parent company of this magazine.)

The impact of COVID will be felt for a very long time. Despite serious economic issues facing all aspects of the trade show industry, there remains an overall commitment to sustainability.

“As it pertains to sustainability and many other aspects of the shows, we have an opportunity to approach our efforts through a new lens,” said Gautier. “We also now have virtual event experience to build upon, which could be an effective tool for greening initiatives. I’m confident these new strategies will lead to even greater progress.”

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