



Planners: Join the CSR Revolution, Save the World

by Maria Lenhart

November 08, 2010

“If not you, who? The only reason to have a meeting is to save the world.”

That’s the audacious challenge that Tim Sanders, a frequent keynote speaker on corporate social responsibility (CSR), has been known to throw out to meeting planner audiences at industry events.

Sanders, a business consultant, former Yahoo executive and author of a bestselling book called *Saving the World at Work* (Doubleday), is passionate about the potential for organizations to make a positive difference in the world. He shared his insights with Travel Market Report:



You have been a frequent speaker at meetings industry events. Why are meeting planners a prime audience for CSR concepts?

Sanders: Meeting planners have a lot of power for change. They are the ones who pick the theme, pick the sites, the vendors and the speakers. They are the movie producers of the company. Meetings are the only time when people sit and think about the company’s goals and objectives. It’s kind of like church. You can create a program that supports positive change, depending on the speakers, the tone, the green practices you use in planning the meeting.

How can meeting planners have an impact on a company’s CSR and sustainability practices?

Sanders: You have to practice what you preach. You have to set an example. If you produce a green meeting, get the word out about it so it influences other practices throughout the company. Produce a report on the meeting’s green footprint — here’s what we did. It’s important to get the word out.

While it may be obvious that CSR can benefit communities, what’s in it for the company?

Sanders: It’s been shown that community giving has a positive impact for the company as well. When executives are involved in things like Habitat for Humanity, they feel better about their jobs. They are less likely to leave. They have a commitment. Endorphins are affected; energy goes up. When salespeople are involved in good works, they get energized and can do more sales calls. It has an actual impact on a salesperson’s productivity. It increases loyalty to the brand.

What are some actual examples where CSR at a meeting had an especially strong impact?

Sanders: A big one was a Timberland conference held post-Katrina in New Orleans. The first day was devoted to usual company business, but that night people from the community were brought in to speak. Day two was devoted to community giving, with people helping build a restaurant. Then 200 sales reps did a tour of the 9th Ward, where much of the worst damage occurred.

One of the reps got off the bus and found a man who was rebuilding a community center. The rep asked him what he needed most and he said shoes, any kind of shoes; people are working in flip-flops. So the rep took off his Timberland boots and gave them to him. When he got back on the bus barefoot, others followed suit,

until the entire bus had donated their boots. Everyone was very quiet on the way back. When they reached the hotel, a crowd had assembled to cheer them. It deeply affected everyone there. This was the high point of the conference.

CSR at meetings really took off after Hurricane Katrina. Has it grown even stronger or has it died down?

Sanders: The social responsibility and green business movement has been bubbling up since 2002 or so. (Think Enron backlash meets Al Gore/Bono make-a-difference branding.) After Katrina, many planners integrated community service or cause as a way to elevate the meeting's meaning.

The recession of 2008-2009 caused planners to focus on the economy, surviving, innovating, saving, etc. – all short- or mid-term strategies. CSR is a long-term strategy, practiced by only the brave.

Over the last six months, I'm seeing meetings begin to integrate cause, CSR, sustainability and community topics and exercises. This is especially true when the companies or associations still list CSR/Sustainability as a top priority in their annual reports. Remember, meetings are solutions that help organizations implement programs and make progress.

Has it taken on new forms or priorities?

Sanders: Meeting planners need to use sustainability as a way to cut costs, not add them. Think digital registration, paperless attendance, no bottled water, etc., over high-end organic/natural product replacements and so on. 'You don't have a budget to do good' is a way to think about this.

I've also seen CSR presented as a branding or talent retention program (tied to the business), and green or climate change pitched as a sustainability program (much more businesslike). So, the packaging is changing, as well as the approach.

In financial services, what just happened on Wall Street is a cautionary tale about long-term thinking, community impact and personal values/ethics. So CSR is more important than ever in these cultures, and that's why planners include speakers on these subjects, along with insider executives talking about it too.

What has been the impact of the poor economic climate on companies' willingness to engage in CSR activities?

Sanders: The economy sorted out the serious players (those who really saw CSR or sustainability as a growth opportunity) from the trend riders (those who thought it was trendy to do good). The serious players continued to forge on, albeit stressing synergy or efficiency over investment or charity. The fakers worked on layoffs, stern corporate messaging and a focus on the bottom line and the next 90 days.

How lasting a phenomenon do you expect CSR to be?

Sanders: I was involved with global warming back in the 1980s — a time when it was laughed at. I've always believed that companies can change the world for good. A lot of environmentalists believe that corporations are evil, but I don't. Corporations are made up of people, and people want to do good. A company has a good chance to save the world.

The social commitment of a company will be instrumental in its survival. Those who don't get it will die. And it's free. It doesn't cost anything to implement CSR. In fact, it's cost-effective.

CSR is the biggest trend of my lifetime. It's not a fad, it's a revolution. You are never going to see a headline that says "Environmental Concerns Are Dead" or "Communities No Longer Need Help."