Youth Conference for Sustainability Leadership

Background

"IMPACT! The Co-operators Youth Conference for Sustainability Leadership" took place in Guelph in September 2009, bringing together 180 university and college students from across Canada to learn about and discuss sustainability concepts pertaining to eight business sectors. The conference was a huge success according to the participants, speakers, workshop leaders, the business sector, academia, and charitable and non-government organizations that worked together to organize it.

Sustainability Aspects

From a sustainability standpoint, IMPACT! provided landmarks in making large meetings sustainable. Sustainable concepts already are applied to many Co-operators meetings, however, as a sustainability-related conference, IMPACT! enabled planners to work with new suppliers and reach new levels of sustainability.

These new suppliers included:

- Me to We Style for shirts and scarves made from 100 % organic cotton
- Biotech Badge System for biodegradable badge holders
- Universal Links for the Canadian-made notebooks, made with 100% recycled content

Other sustainable initiatives helped to make everything from meals to transportation as green as possible. Stainless steel water bottles and water stations were provided. The majority of meals were vegetarian (a more sustainable choice than meat) and each included a choice of fair trade coffee and organic co-op food when possible. In addition, the University of Guelph's Hospitality department used local produce and foods in developing the menus.

During the conference and its meetings:

- White boards replaced flipcharts
- Web-based communications greatly reduced printed materials
- A small booklet that fit into the nametag contained all necessary information for participants
- All printed material was on 100 per cent recycled, wind-powered, Forestry Stewardship Council stock (and was recycled following the event);
- Badge holders could be reused
- The shipping of materials was minimized as the event was held at the local university and close to The Co-operators head office

Travel plans to IMPACT! were arranged as sustainably as possible. Many Ontario and Quebec participants travelled by rail to avoid unnecessary flights. Arrivals were timed so groups of participants could be shuttled together to Guelph from Toronto's Pearson International Airport and Union Train Station. As a result, only two buses were required from Union Station to Guelph and only one for the return trip. Finally, biodiesel (fuel efficient) buses transported the students from their hotel to the downtown River Run Centre for conference sessions.

All told, the total carbon footprint for the conference was 132 metric tonnes of CO2: Air travel = 114 tonnes, rail= 5 tonnes, meals = 3 tonnes, hotel rooms and meeting space = 10 tons. To minimize the event's ecological footprint, The Co-operators set aside funds to purchase carbon offsets and asked participants to direct the funds to a Canadian organization that provides solid offset strategies.

As Chad Park, Principal Advisor of The Natural Step Canada and a member of the IMPACT! planning committee said, "I've been telling everyone that I've just come back from the most sustainably organized conference I've ever been to!"