Going Green on a Post-Pandemic Budget

Hotel leaders staying sustainable and saving in an uncertain travel industry.

By Barbara Rush Area Manager, Columbia Hospitality | May 02, 2021

Hotel properties across the globe have made many changes in the past year to the way they operate through innovation and adaptation. The COVID-19 storm has ravaged the hospitality industry, and with struggling businesses and limited budgets, it's hard to see why making other initiatives like operating sustainably and adopting eco-friendly practices should remain a priority.

Yet, the fight against climate change didn't stop with the onset of the pandemic; it just took a backseat. According to the Industrial Tourism Partnership, for the hotel industry to align with the Paris Climate Agreement, it will need to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions per room per year by 90% by 2050.

Even with that daunting task, why should one of the hardest-hit industries of 2020 focus on anything other than recovering? Because now more than ever, sustainability and saving can go hand-in-hand.

What Works? A Lesson from Hotel Leaders

Having a sustainable mindset has always been at the forefront of Executive Chef Devin Kellogg's mind. As the creative culinary vision behind Semiahmoo Resort, Golf, & Spa, a seaside resort in the Washington state city of Blaine near the Canadian border, Kellogg is always reimagining a greener way of operating. With an abundance of under-utilized products in the local Skagit Valley, he knew that sourcing would be a game-changer for the property.

Connecting with nearby farmers and other restaurant leaders in the area, Kellogg immersed himself in the community while keeping sustainability at the forefront. By purchasing through local producers, he was able to streamline deliveries to avoid the fossil fuel emissions that result from delivering goods across the country. He was able to be an integral part of the crop planning process by meeting with local farmers and eliminating the excess foods from future grows.

Implementing safe food handling practices like wearing disposable gloves during food service is recommended

For Kellogg, supporting his neighbors pairs well with driving the eco-friendly narrative, "We're decreasing our footprint because we are buying from the area the products are grown in. Sustainability also translates into the community. You're supporting the people that live next door to you." Not only do these efforts lead to a greener practice, but they also lead to a better story. Through these local partnerships, culinary teams can give their restaurants an identity, show that they are connected to the greater community, and give their guests a small look into the efforts they are taking to fight climate change.

For Jim Kerrigan, the General Manager of Lodge On The Desert in Tucson, Arizona, staying sustainable is an opportunity to let the guests have a say in their stay. They developed the "Go Green in the Desert" package as a commitment to reducing their carbon footprint and to allow guests to take part in their effort to fight climate change. When guests stay three or more nights, they can opt to include paperless check-in and limited housekeeping services, and in return, the hotel will provide a discount on their stay.

The package has been quite popular, making it rewarding for guests to choose an eco-friendly stay, while reducing labor, energy, and water use that comes with cleaning a room. It's a win-win for the property, the guest, and the earth. Kerrigan can already see a difference in their guests, with many choosing the package over a normal stay. Reflecting on the change, Kerrigan states, "I think our guests are conscious about climate change and tend to be less wasteful when they stay. It's just part of everyone's lives."

This shift in consumer behavior has led the hotel to make significant changes in the way they operate; one of their biggest focuses being water conservation. In their desert location, water conservation is a prominent goal for many businesses. At Lodge On The Desert, they've opted for a majority of low-flow toilets and showerheads and have gotten into the habit of asking guests if they'd like water during their meal instead of assuming, which can lead to increased water waste. By listening to their guests' desires for action on climate change, the team has come together to find fresh solutions that lead to sustainability, easier operations, and greater guest satisfaction.

Setting a "green goal" for your hotel will also help in the fight against climate change. For instance, Columbia Clean, a partnership between the Seattle-based management company, Columbia Hospitality, and Ecolab, a global leader in infection prevention, set an objective of "100% property participation in the creation of an energy conservation plan, with a goal of 10% reduction by the end of 2022."

With this new goal, each Columbia Hospitality property will select a Conservation Champion to lead the everyday charge. Each Conservation Champion will go through their property and audit their current status as an eco-friendly hotel. Then, the property team will determine their conservation initiatives, and the leadership team at Columbia Hospitality will provide recommendations for improvement. While an ambitious one, this goal will allow individual team members to feel empowered to take eco-friendly practices into their own hands and make a real difference.


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All employees are required to wear masks throughout the hotel. Pictured is a front desk agent at The FINCH in Walla Walla, Washington

The Pandemic Setback: Learning and Adapting

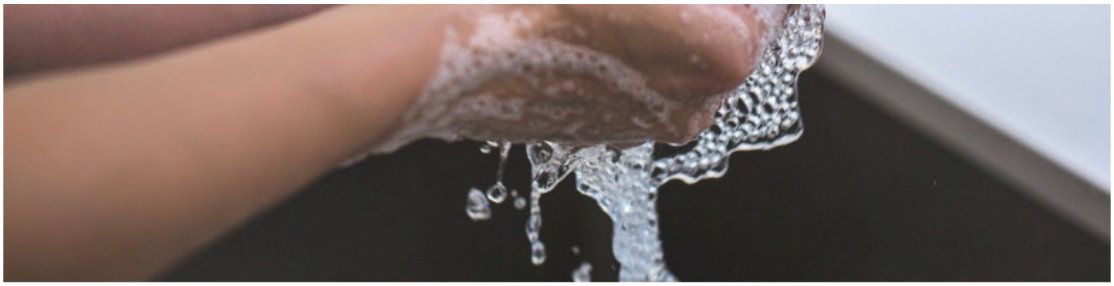
When COVID-19 ravaged the world, the hospitality industry was flipped upside down. With the constant changes and heartbreak for most hotel workers, many initiatives, including sustainability, took a backseat. Restaurant closures led to an onslaught of packaging needs for to-go items. Stringent cleaning protocols have led to more chemical and water waste, and the focus on eco-friendly practices has diminished.

Yet with all these setbacks, according to Chef Kellogg, "COVID made us stop in a lot of ways, but it gave us the opportunity to consider our current carbon footprint." Hotels are using fewer paper products with the introduction of QR code menus and digital signage, saving money on collateral costs we once thought necessary. "The pandemic has let us reinvent ourselves," Kellogg says. If anything, COVID-19 has allowed hotels to take a hard look at their finances and cut back on the wastefulness of many standard practices.

For cities like Seattle, where restrictions on restaurants have been more prevalent, to-go was the only option for many establishments. To combat the increase in container waste, the city made it mandatory to have recyclable or compostable packaging. Styrofoam packaging, plastic straws, forks, and knives are all banned in the city, and restaurants must provide recycling and compost bins for customers and in the kitchen. This initiative not only encouraged restaurants to keep sustainability top of mind but actually required it.

With the cleanliness standards that have come along with the pandemic, the need for more digital information is necessary. The less physical contact you can make with your guests, for now, the better. Guest messaging apps and keyless entry are looking like more appealing options. They will also help to eliminate the paper waste often provided to guests with key packets and other check-in materials. If key cards are looking like a more realistic option based on budget, opting for biodegradable cardboard is a possibility, and the technology stays the same.

While a big waste for hotels has been personal hygiene products, like individual shampoos and conditioners, they have remained necessary for many properties looking to avoid the bacteria that can set up in longer-use products. With this in mind, donating these items to a company like Clean the World helps to reduce the waste by breaking them down and turning them into hygiene kits for third-world countries.



Required frequent hand washing for all team members is standard best practice

Tying it Together: The Rebound of the Industry and Eco-Friendly Practices

There is now a light at the end of the very dark tunnel we have come to know simply as the "pandemic." With vaccinations and "vaxications" on the rise, how can we look to a brighter future that includes saving the planet? One step at a time.

1. Keep budget top of mine. If we want to continue our journey in adopting green practices, we must do it in an economically sustainable way. Our industry is always at risk, the pandemic being a prime example. So, positioning ourselves in a way that will last through the ups and downs of hospitality is imperative.
2. Rely on your community. Work with local partners to bring your climate improvement goals to your neighborhood. Sourcing locally is more sustainable, leads to less waste, and is a better story to share with your future guests.
3. Give your guests a say in their stay. Whether it's a package that allows your guests to opt for an eco-friendlier stay or simply keeping them informed on your current practices, guests are searching for ways to travel light-in a green way.
4. Set a "green goal." Empower your team by setting a sustainability goal for the year. Allow the entire property team to be a part of real change so they can feel as if they're truly making a difference. Perhaps, even offer an incentive to team members who can step up to complete your goal.
5. Learn from the hardships. The pandemic has set us back in a few ways in terms of sustainability but has allowed innovative ideas to blossom, and it has encouraged many properties to reinvent themselves. We need to look at what has been working during these trying times and continue many of these initiatives moving forward.

With past eco-friendly practices and new ones learned through the pandemic, we can aim to combine the two for a cost-effective approach to tackling climate change. Not only will these steps benefit our planet and our communities, but they will also empower your local towns, cities, farms, and team members, allowing your guests to learn and make choices with their values top of mind. Oh, and saving financially will lead to longer-term stability.

Ms. Rush

Barbara Rush currently serves as an Area Manager for Columbia Hospitality, as well as General Manager of Hotel Interurban. As an area manager, Ms. Rush serves as a leader across multiple properties within the Columbia Hospitality portfolio representing award-winning hotels, conference centers, distinctive venues, private and public golf facilities, restaurants and bars, as well as residential properties. Ms. Rush has been a Columbia team member for more than 23 years, first starting as a banquet server at Bell Harbor International Conference Center. Since then, she has held multiple roles, including leadership support for The Smith Tower, Seattle's original skyscraper, and General Manager of Talaris Conference Center. Ms. Rush has also been a part of strategic consulting projects and task forces, adding value at every touchpoint. In the past year, she has also served as an integral part of Columbia's Diversity Equity and Inclusion committee, enhancing the core value of inclusion across the portfolio. Barbara Rush can be contacted at +1 206-268-7072 or brush@talariscc.com Please visit http://www.columbiahospitality.com for more information.

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