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## Meetings Industry Town Hall on Climate Change: *Elevating the Conversation*

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MPI, Amy Spatrisano, CMP and Marge Anderson would like to thank Mitchell Beer, CMM of The Conference Publishers for his work creating this summary.

### Opening discussion

Amy Spatrisano said the presence of 80 to 100 participants, compared to seven or eight at the green meetings town hall at MPI's 2007 Professional Education Conference—North America, demonstrated the surge of interest in climate change and sustainability in the intervening six months. Marge Anderson said the purpose of the town hall was to generate a “robust, dynamic conversation” with “a lot of opportunity for interaction.”

Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from coal-fired power plants are a leading cause of climate change, Anderson noted. “That’s why energy people care about climate change,” she said. “And energy efficiency is the cheapest way to reduce your carbon footprint, with the highest return on investment.”

A participant identified light bulb replacement as one of the best ways to reduce electricity consumption. Anderson agreed that compact fluorescent bulbs are “probably the cheapest, easiest, and highest-payback way to make a difference.” But notwithstanding the few hotels with light bulb replacement programs, she said hospitality “is still behind some other industries.” Hotels could qualify for “free money” and technical assistance to reduce their carbon footprints. But energy efficiency advisors tend to ignore hospitality, partly because they don’t understand the industry, and partly because the industry itself “is a little bit difficult to work with.”

Anderson compared the dialogue on climate change and energy efficiency to the early days of the dot-com boom. “Sustainability is a huge and growing industry, and we are experiencing human capital shortages,” she said, but there are “lots of opportunities” for further economic activity.

Spatrisano agreed that sustainability is here to stay, adding that the discussion is accelerating and broadening. “It’s definitely beyond green meetings,” she said. “There’s a much larger conversation about the economy, the environment, and the social aspects” of sustainable development.

But she said limited knowledge and expertise within the meetings industry is compounded by widespread complacency and inaction, at a time when government agencies in a number of countries are setting standards for green meetings without consulting meeting professionals.



The other major concern is the number of organizations that are looking for recognition and public profile by promising to make their operations carbon neutral over a short period of time. “They don’t know what they just said,” Spatrisano said. “They have no idea about the impact.” One CEO declared an event carbon neutral two months out, but “the event planner had no idea what that meant or how to do it. So I got this frantic phone call.”

At the same time, she said green meetings are a “tremendous opportunity” for meeting professionals seeking a seat at the C-level table, and for MPI as a whole. Planners and suppliers who understand the environmental and social impact of meetings “will absolutely be invited and insistent that you’re at the table for your organizations.”

### Audience response

Using the audience response system, Spatrisano and Anderson invited participants’ feedback on the session and session topic.

<b>Why did you attend the town hall? (%)</b>	
Personal passion	20
Want information on how to make my work greener	39
See a market opportunity	18
Help MPI make a difference	14
Skeptical about the whole issue	6
Nothing better to do	2
Other	0

<b>What are your views on climate change? (%)</b>	
Not a big enough issue to worry about	0
Serious issue but we’re well on the way to solving it	10
Need to do a lot more a lot faster	83
Already too late	6

<b>What’s your company doing? (%)</b>	
Nothing	10
Don’t have enough information to answer	18
Taking small steps	28
Taking large steps	12
Progressive increase in commitment/part of the culture	26
We’re green	6

A meeting planner for an energy conservation company said her organization had taken major steps to green its events, and buys carbon offsets for GHG emissions it can’t change. “It’s our passion and our mission at our company to conserve energy, in both the residential and commercial sectors.” Company events specify reusable cutlery, utensils, and plates, and an in-house green team teaches new employees how to compost and carry

reusable water bottles and coffee mugs wherever they go. The organization participates in the local commuter challenge every year, and may begin buying transit passes for employees.

A participant said her convention center had changed over its boiler and water systems and developed a system of green performance packages for customers. It's standard practice for the facility to provide reusable silverware and bulk sugar and cream at coffee stations. But clients can also pay extra for special zero-carbon or zero-waste packages that include advice from an eco-counsellor.

<b>What specific steps is your company taking? (%)</b>	
Recycling	29
Energy efficiency	14
Reduced/more energy-efficient travel	6
Alternative/renewable energy	6
Staff training/consistent communication	6
Purchasing carbon offsets	2
New production processes	6
Planning green meetings	8
Asking vendors to be green/report on supply chain	18
Other	6

Spatrisano explained that a carbon offset is a payment, usually in the range of US\$5 to US\$25, that mitigates the climate impact of an activity like air travel. The money goes to an organization that invests in tree planting, renewable energy development, or some other initiative to reduce greenhouse gases. Most, though not all, carbon offset organizations are non-profit.

<b>Why is the business community getting involved in/paying more attention to climate change? (%)</b>	
Shamed into doing something	27
Fear of bad business results	6
Reduce risk	6
Prepare for regulation	14
Stakeholder demand	8
New market opportunities	18
Market position as a leader	18
Personal passion at high level	4

Anderson cited General Electric as a company that sees new market opportunities in the response to climate change. "They're an organization that wants to own a lot of the technical solutions to climate change, so they're moving fast." A participant said cost savings are the main motivator for most of his clients who are going green.

Spatrisano said many organizations are looking for funding to help them reduce their energy use, even though the investment will help them save money. Anderson cited one hotel that saved US\$500,000 in annual energy costs by replacing boilers for a water park.

A participant asked why a convention center would charge extra for green packages if efficiency investments save money. The facility representative said the enhanced service includes consulting support and performance reporting; she added that specialty products like organic food would become less expensive over time.

Spatrisano said some suppliers are still learning to share green-related savings with their clients. She recalled one event where she insisted that a food and beverage vendor switch from black plastic tableware to recyclable ecoware. After predicting higher costs, the vendor was pleased to save US\$2,700—but not pleased enough to pass the saving on to the client.

It's still about perception," Spatrisano said. "It's about planner demand. And when it comes to buildings, there are some initial costs to put in certain systems, but the payback is pretty short."

<b>What is your biggest concern about our industry? (%)</b>	
Playing catch-up	13
Lack of experts	8
Potential regulation	5
Government setting standards, with or without us	15
Our industry's environmental footprint	48
Going green might reduce meetings business	8
Other	2

Bruce MacMillan, CA  
Chief Executive Officer, Meeting Professionals International

MPI Chief Executive Officer Bruce MacMillan, CA linked the discussion to MPI's strategic commitment to elevate the member conversation and experience. "One of the ways we believe our members can make themselves more valuable strategic assets and get that proverbial seat at the table is to demonstrate how they can make a difference, through their participation and the output of their meetings."

MacMillan recalled that a green focus was a prerequisite when he was involved in producing an Olympic bid several years ago. "You have to specifically say what your community will do to mitigate the environmental impact of an International Olympic Committee (IOC) event, as well as the social impact," he said. "They believe that through sport they can change the world. So connect the dots." He cited the July 7 Live Earth concert as an event that had raised the profile of environmental and social sustainability, noting that the Wembley Stadium concert was used as a test of the UK's BS 8901 standard for green performance in the meetings industry.

MPI's International Board of Directors agreed to sign the United Nations Global Compact on Corporate Social Responsibility as a first step in elevating this conversation. The Global Compact's 10 principles address business practices in the areas of human rights, labor, environmental sustainability, and anti-corruption, and its 3,700 signatories include a great many organizations that employ MPI members.

MacMillan said MPI's corporate social responsibility strategy begins with information, followed by inspiration and action. "We're not there yet, but we're moving fast and we believe we can catch up." He said the cascade of member interest in climate change and sustainability demonstrates that "we can move fast if we put our minds to it."

Anderson, who serves on MPI's International Board, said the decision to sign the UN Global Compact was indicative of "a new MPI. I know a lot of us were pretty fired up by that." One part of that transition was the commitment to co-create the Town Hall on Climate Change by inviting members to discuss the session on a pre-WEC blog. During that process, one participant suggested dividing the discussion into three headings: What we need to know, what members need to do, and what MPI needs to do.

What do we need to know?

On the blog, members asked about green opportunities beyond recycling, barriers to sustainability, and the sustainability options that are cheap, easy, and offer great paybacks—like changing light bulbs, or supporting a towel reuse program by installing towel bars in bathrooms.

A participant noted that compact fluorescent light bulbs contain mercury, and must be treated as hazardous waste after they're used up. Spatrisano said compact fluorescents are still the most environmentally friendly option, at least until LED bulbs enter the market.

"It's a different concept for our culture to think of this process as a journey," she said. "We're used to putting together goals to an endpoint, checking them off our list, and moving on to the next thing. But it's an ongoing journey. New products, services, ideas, and processes are coming onboard every day, and it's about balancing what makes sense for you and your organization."

A participant urged hoteliers to take advantage of utility rebates for energy-efficient light bulbs, chillers, and boilers. Anderson said the meeting for which she won MPI's 2007 Global Paragon Award took place at a facility that received free light bulbs from its power utility and saved \$22,000 on electricity. In the next two years, legislation may require an energy efficiency portfolio standard across the United States.

The online discussion also raised concerns about "greenwashing," as well as the balance between the business opportunities in green performance and the penalties companies can foresee for not moving faster.

A participant asked where she would find unbiased, spin-free information on climate change. Anderson said the issue is more controversial in the United States than in other parts of the world. She suggested starting with the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UN IPCC), though a participant said the panel had spent a year

toning down its findings to meet the demands of government funders. The biggest problem, he said, is the 10 years that it will take for any action on climate change to make a difference. “Waiting for more data isn’t going to solve the problem.”

Spatrisano said the evidence for climate change starts closer to home. When she asked participants whether they had failed to see strange weather at home in the last year or two, no one raised a hand. “It isn’t all about black-and-white information,” she said. “Just look around and see what’s happening in your own local communities and businesses.”

A participant noted that U.S. mayors, states, and regional organizations have undertaken “the most fantastic activity” on climate change. Anderson cited Chicago as a shining example, noting that Mayor Richard M. Daley is “very passionate about not waiting for the feds” on an issue that affects the city’s economy and citizens’ well-being. But a participant recalled recent experience with local hoteliers who were mostly unenthusiastic about city grants to reduce their energy use and carbon emissions.

Spatrisano acknowledged the enthusiasm around green performance, and stressed the importance of thinking the process through. It sounds great to declare an event carbon neutral, she said: “You just write your cheque and it’ll all be good.” But the tougher, more important work is to embrace every opportunity to use less energy, and then buy carbon offsets to cover whatever is left.

A participant said MPI’s online wiki should include a glossary of green terminology, a roadmap or checklist for planning a green meeting, and case studies of hotels whose operations are energy neutral. Anderson agreed that “we have to kick the tires on this, and there are going to be failures.” She cited Spatrisano’s company website, [www.meetingstrategies.worldwide](http://www.meetingstrategies.worldwide), as a source of case studies.

A participant said she had recently seen the best and the worst of recycling: The Fairmont property in Montreal offered the first blue box program she’d ever seen in a hotel. But her own Fortune 500 office products company had discontinued its in-house recycling program, even though it organized green conferences and had identified waste reduction as a core value.

Spatrisano said green case studies should talk about challenges as well as achievements. “Not all of it is going to be perfect. It’s not all going to run smoothly.” So it will be important for practitioners to share the bad with the good, the lessons learned, and the new approaches that result.

A participant asked whether MPI would co-create its approach to climate change and green meetings in partnership with the energy industry. Anderson encouraged the “energy geeks” in the room to talk after the session, noting that energy specialists “don’t always understand how normal people make decisions”: although most people buy their light bulbs along with their groceries, the first energy-efficient light bulb programs were introduced in hardware stores.

A participant asked about governments setting standards for green meetings. In addition to BS 8901, Spatrisano said standards are under development in Denmark and Quebec, and a *Green Meetings Act* was introduced in the U.S. Congress on July 12. The bill

would require all U.S. government contracting agents to purchase green conference and meeting supplies.

“If this passes,” she told Americans in the audience, “it will change our industry overnight.” How will it be implemented? How will it be policed and measured? “That’s still under conversation,” she said. The bill was developed without industry input, “and that kind of thing scares me a bit.”

A participant said green transportation, hotels, and convention centers are becoming more common around the world. China is about to complete its second “completely green” 1,000-bed hotel, and will complete construction on its first green city by 2009. He said this information is readily available to anyone who “doesn’t want to mess around and shuffle paper clips” in response to the global environmental crisis. Spatrisano cited Johannesburg, South Africa as a city that has introduced a major green initiative, and agreed that the scene is shifting very quickly. “It’s happening at such a pace that it’s hard to keep up with all the things that are going on.”

An hotelier in the audience said her general manager would only embrace green performance based on revenues, costs, and comparative data from other facilities. “If we can book more business because our hotel is green, that’s what’s going to make it work.” Anderson suggested sending the GM a copy of the recent Congressional bill. Spatrisano cited a U.S. facility that had gained \$2 million in new business—and tracked a major reduction in operating costs—as a result of its green profile. Anderson said information on facility energy performance is sometimes easier to find on the U.S. government’s Energy Star website, [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov), than on the hotels’ own corporate sites.

A Canadian hotelier said her chain had seen about 50 RFPs in the past year that included requests for information on green initiatives. She said her facility already had a green team in place to coordinate in-house activities, but stressed planners’ role in prompting action. “It’s a matter of waiting for that demand.” Spatrisano said the lack of a single green meeting standard has led to a wider range of questions from planners, making it more difficult for suppliers to respond.

A participant said her hotel had saved thousands of dollars per year, with minimal upfront investment, simply by diverting trash to compost. The facility’s green initiative has also attracted new business, most recently in the form of an RFP for 400 room nights. Spatrisano noted that the facility had taken action without waiting for direction from its parent company.

“This was a team of champions,” she said. “The GM and the director of operations saw an opportunity to convince their brand that they could try this as a test market, and they were incredibly successful.”

A participant said planners would benefit from a template and a list of standard questions for site selection. Spatrisano said she and consultant Mike Wallace of San Francisco-based Wallace Partners would be working with MPI to develop practical tools to support green meetings and CSR initiatives.

Another hotelier said she had begun reporting on the business her facility had lost to competitors that could claim stronger green performance. “The bottom line is that the GM will listen,” especially when the loss reaches US\$100,000 or more.

A participant asked whether the green meetings discussion had extended beyond MPI. Spatrisano said the Green Meetings Industry Council ([www.greenmeetings.info](http://www.greenmeetings.info)) was working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on standard development, but explained that some of the associations affiliated with the Convention Industry Council have not yet embraced the transition to green meetings. “The challenge is that it has to be something our industry takes on together,” she said, particularly in the interest of developing standard terms and definitions.

What do we need to do?

In an online survey prior to WEC, respondents expressed interest in reducing the industry’s carbon footprint and learning about industry case studies. Spatrisano said a commitment to a more modest carbon footprint “is a very broad statement that incorporates so many components,” and raises important issues for meeting professionals.

Organizations often think about controlling their carbon output by cutting back on travel. But “we are social animals,” Spatrisano said. “We have to meet. We book business predominantly on relationships. You can get only so much from e-mail and phone conversations,” but 80% of human communication is non-verbal—so meetings are not about to disappear.

People can certainly be smarter about when and where they meet, and Spatrisano said the meetings industry could benefit from that change. For example, a focus on a facility’s carbon and energy footprint might mean turning down a menu that calls for blueberries in Wisconsin in January, recognizing that the source of the produce won’t be “anything remotely local.”

What should MPI do?

On the blog, respondents called on MPI to research the barriers to sustainability, produce tools to help planners measure green performance, and improve the green profile of its own meetings.

A participant called on airports to introduce recycling for water bottles and other carry-on items that are confiscated at security.

Anderson asked whether hoteliers would benefit from market research to help them introduce green initiatives to their general managers.

A participant challenged MPI leadership to “walk the talk, by reducing their travel and walking around with their (reusable) coffee cups and water bottles.” She said visible, day-to-day leadership would “give it a level of credibility. We look to our leaders as they change every year, and that buy-in should continue over time.” Spatrisano said MPI had

identified green meetings and sustainability as a long-term initiative, “but they need your feedback...They’re jumping in as fast as they can, in a smart way.”

A participant stressed the need to explain green initiatives when they’re introduced. She said some colleagues had failed to realize that the water bottles in their conference bags were intended as an alternative to disposable bottles. Spatrisano said she would encourage MPI to run a PowerPoint presentation at the beginning of general sessions to highlight the green initiatives it has undertaken in the previous six months.

Another attendee suggested making the next Professional Education Conference—North America paperless, and urged exhibitors not to send follow-up post cards. Spatrisano said she had seen trade shows with more waste left behind, adding that MPI would be introducing green standards and expectations for exhibitors.

“There are so many responsible things with recycled content that you can give away,” she said. They didn’t even exist a year or two ago. So, exhibitors, be smart.”

What action will you take?

Spatrisano described her company’s recent assignment to green the Live Earth concert at Giants Stadium in New Jersey. With less than two months’ lead time, an onsite team of several staff and 800 volunteers achieved a 76% waste diversion rate for the stadium and parking lot.

A participant said her hotel had been recycling for 15 years; she added that her family of six had reduced its non-recycled waste to one garbage can per week. Spatrisano recalled a conversation with one facility that had established a 20% diversion goal, but had had difficulties meeting 50% of that goal. She encouraged participants to get the ball rolling by asking questions, building awareness, and specifying green performance in their RFPs.

Participants talked about finding environmentally friendly giveaways for trade shows, or replacing the giveaways with charitable donations.