

Reduce-recycle-reuse, mantra for 'zero waste'



Conducting any event calls for careful coordination; whether it be a child's birthday party, wedding, business conference, trade-show or public event. It must be well attended, well managed and finally well received to be successful! Recently, my office was the Design Partner for a sustainability festival conducted by the Reciprocity Foundation, a public charitable trust. It was billed as a "Zero Waste Event". And we learnt when asked, that an event that will cause or generate very little waste from planning through implementation to clean up, can be defined as one that is 'Zero Waste'.

The best way to deal with waste — food, paper, aluminum cans, styrofoam packaging, PET bottles, PE bags, and PVC flex, is not to create them in the first place. For instance, printed invitations and posters in public spaces generally announce any event. As the goal was "zero waste", publicity efforts for the festival were shifted to social media and event websites. Zero waste priorities were highlighted in vendor or caterer contracts to ensure compliance. Staff and volunteers at recycling points had clearly assigned responsibilities to enforce the guidelines. Participants were coached about actions they must take to reduce wastes. And through verification post, the event evaluated the extent to which the sustainability goals were achieved.

The one major form of waste is food. Therefore closely managing food and water supplies, consumption and waste generation at the exhibition eliminated a bulk of the nauseating garbage. Serving water in plastic sachets or bottles

at the venue was banned, and friends, beware of paper cups! These are lined with plastic, and therefore impossible to recycle. Remember, aluminum foil is recyclable but plastic wrappings are not. It seems always advisable to serve box lunches wrapped in recyclable containers. Tips to emulate include serving bite-size portions in reusable food containers or restricting the menu to finger foods, which do not require plastic forks and spoons.

The sustainability festival was attended by nearly 6000 people over two days! The brief to us as designers was to use natural materials, which are easily compostable or made with recycled materials. I therefore used frameworks of casuarina wrapped with jute to decorate the venue. LEDs in gunny bags provided frugal but beautiful mood lighting. There was a neat plan to compost food scraps, and clearly labeled compost bins manned by volunteers helped people segregate their wastes effectively. Earthenware and matkas were creatively used, and by going back to basics, use of plastics was minimised if not eliminated. We managed to collect 50kgs of compostables, 30kgs of recyclable plastic

/ paper, 10kgs of soiled paper, cups and tissues and 230kgs of thin plastic bags! The plastic waste was sent to shredders to convert them into fibres for laying concrete roads. The Foundation partnered with the Chennai Trekking Club and Trashgaadi to enable this much admired "Zero Waste Event".

Go ahead! Plan your next event to be "Zero Waste," and be a smart trendsetter! Share your learning, so others can adapt your successes. If there is a will, it is possible.



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