

alberta

hospitality

The Official Magazine of the Alberta Hotel and Lodging Association

Winter 2010



calculating your carbon footprint

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PM40026059

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CALCULATING YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT

How Do You Measure Up?

by Debbie Minke

Trouble is brewing on planet earth. Our fragile domain has been neglected and abused for centuries, and now it's payback time.





Escalating emissions of harmful greenhouse gases (GHG) have created climate change that is touching the lives of all earth's inhabitants, and even threatening their existence. The need for action has never been more urgent. Sustainability needs to become a top priority of governments, businesses, and individuals. What part does the hospitality industry play in climate change, and how can we mitigate the negative effects our businesses have on the environment? You need to know what your carbon footprint is, and how to erase it.

According to recent reports, the accommodations sector is the second largest source of carbon emissions and represents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. The heating and cooling of North America's buildings, including hotels and resorts, comprises as much as 40% of the continent's GHG emissions. In Alberta, the average 150-room hotel contributes 6 tonnes of GHG - double the national average - to our global environment every day! That's equivalent to driving 440 cars, heating and lighting 312 homes, or taking 11,000 airplane flights. Reducing energy consumption will not only benefit the environment, it will benefit your bottom line.

A carbon footprint is a measure of the impact our day-to-day activities have on the environment, and in particular, climate change. It relates to the amount of GHG we produce through burning fossil fuels for electricity, heating, transportation, etc. as well as indirect emissions from products or services and human activities. Individuals, communities, businesses, or static entities like buildings have carbon footprints, commonly expressed in carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) tonnes. The goal of becoming carbon neutral involves reduction of consumption and conservation in tandem with the purchase of carbon offsets to mitigate one's carbon impact.

Needless to say, the prospect of crunching numbers with complex formulas to come up with your CO₂e figure is daunting. Is there a way for

a hotel to calculate their carbon footprint on its own? The International Standards Organization (ISO) is a network of national institutes of 162 countries, and it is the world's largest developer and publisher of international standards for business, government, and society. The ISO's environmental management standards include ISO 14064 and ISO 14065 for GHG accounting, verification, and emissions trading.

This methodology has been further developed by several organizations, which offer Canadian businesses advisory services and training to build the skills required to measure, monitor, and manage their carbon footprint. With the assistance of the CSA Standards Climate Division, LivClean has developed a specialized carbon calculator for the accommodations industry. The AHLA has partnered with LivClean to offer the LivClean Eco-Stay Program as one of its Member Value Programs. This program makes it easy for hoteliers to get started, providing a hotel-specific carbon calculator, and a review of current consumption. Recommendations are made for measurement, improvement, and goals. Marketing materials are supplied to inform guests of the property's participation in the program, and the real impact the program is having on the environment in terms that the guest can understand. Thousands of dollars can be generated to support your green initiatives, and certified Canadian carbon offset projects are offered, enabling you to totally erase your carbon footprint.

Why Bother?

The concern for the future of our planet has prompted governments around the world to require companies to report activities that compromise our environment. Preparing now for inevitable emission cap requirements in Alberta demonstrates foresight and wisdom. In BC, local municipalities have already committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2012, and many businesses have incorporated at least some dimension of sustainability in their operations.



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Perhaps most important is the realization that the public is demanding that environmental stewardship become a top priority for the accommodation industry. Guests have become more discerning, and market research indicates that 70% of Canadians are prepared to fork out a few extra dollars in order to limit climate change. Though a property may not have achieved carbon neutrality yet, having a green program in place with well-documented goals and visible efforts is essential to some travellers, especially the environmentally-conscious younger generations. “Guests are asking more questions these days,” asserts Christina de Vries, Director of Marketing & Communications for LivClean Corporation. “They are rightfully skeptical, and want to be sure that a property’s environmental initiatives are substantiated by qualified third parties.”

“Embracing the goal of becoming carbon neutral was a no-brainer for us,” suggests Ryan Eckert, Assistant General Manager at the High Country Inn, Banff. “We were already environmentally conscious and engaged in many green initiatives. This one extra step fit our value system and goals for the property, and differentiates us from hotels in the area.” Naomi Plausteiner, General Manager of the Best Western Heidelberg and Chinook Motel in Lethbridge, concurs. “Pursuing carbon neutrality provides another layer, another way to further improve our long-existing environmental stewardship initiatives and add value for guests.”

Getting Started

The most important step is deciding to get started. Evaluate your level of commitment, set goals for sustainability, and put your team in place to help measure, monitor, and manage your carbon impact. Your “green team” might include staff involved in operations, property or facility management, transportation, and accounting. You might even consider hiring an environmental /sustainability specialist.

Even before your carbon neutral program has been given the green light, collect important data. Track your electricity and natural gas consumption with accounting methods. Record your waste disposal numbers, considering your contribution to the landfill. Record the mileage of fleet vehicles and their fuel consumption as well as any employee-related travel. (Don’t forget flights to conferences, taxis or car rentals, etc.) Your carbon inventory report should also include transportation of goods to and from your property as well as the indirect emissions generated by the products and services you use. In order to validate all your hard work in measuring your carbon footprint, you can have it published through CSA’s GHG CleanStart™ Registry. Then identify opportunities to improve your footprint and reduce emissions with specific actions.

Carbon Offsets

Once you’ve reduced your emissions as much as you can, then negate what’s left by purchasing carbon offsets from carbon reducing environmental projects. You will then be carbon neutral.

Canada Standards Association maintains the national GHG CleanProjects™ Registry to verify the emission reductions/removal of GHG/carbon offset projects. Serialization is provided so that offset purchasers can be sure that the projects they are supporting have been verified and inspected, and claims for CO₂e reduction are valid.

Ensure that projects are efficient, and offer additional long-term benefits to the community that undertakes them. They should provide something extra, making a reduction over and above the current level. Choose

projects with emission reductions that are already realized. A tree planted today won't reach maturity for another 80 years, and the full carbon value will not be realized until then.

As governments, businesses, and individuals, we need to move toward a prosperous, low carbon future. The hospitality industry can lead the way, showing it's possible to tread lightly while delivering an exceptional guest experience. ∞

Shrinking Your Footprint

According to industry experts, lighting accounts for up to 35% of a hotel's energy bill, so replacing lighting with low-energy bulbs is a significant first step in reducing energy consumption. Enlist your staff's help to ensure that unused lights are turned off. Motion-activated lighting can offer savings as well.

Heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems are gluttons when it comes to energy. Reduce usage and improve efficiency by installing sufficient insulation in walls and around pipes. Occupancy-sensing thermostats will ensure that empty rooms are not being heated or cooled unnecessarily. Even a simple thing like closing window coverings during peak temperatures can make a difference. Replace windows with more energy-efficient, tinted glass. Some properties have installed systems whereby a guest's key needs to be inserted in order to activate lights and the HVAC system in their room.

Geothermal or hybrid heating and cooling systems offer significant energy savings, although the initial investment needed is substantial. In most cases there is a five to seven year wait before the savings really kick in. Of course, with new builds a system is required anyway, so your ROI may come sooner.

Low-flow faucets and showerheads can help properties reduce overall water usage and energy consumption for hot water systems. Low-flow toilets, or even better, dual flush toilets commonly used in Europe, Australia, and Asia, can slash water consumption by 20-80%, depending on the tank size of the model being replaced.

A linen and towel reuse program is a given, and guests have come to expect it. Studies suggest that in one month a 150-room hotel can save over 22,714 litres of water, and 151 litres of detergent. High efficiency washers are now available that incorporate ozone technology to allow for cold water washing. As much as possible, use Energy Star rated appliances in all areas of your operation.

Replace your fleet vehicles with hybrids or other energy efficient cars, and consider using biodiesel. Reduce air travel by teleconferencing and telecommuting.

Source local suppliers for goods and services, and host carbon-neutral conferences and events. Not only can these reduce your footprint, in time they will provide a positive ROI.

In order to reduce your impact on the land fill, recycle as much as possible. There are many ways to reduce waste, including well-planned purchasing, packaging, recycling, and education. Invite guests to participate by stocking each guestroom with recycling bins. If the volume becomes too much for your staff to handle, contract it out.

As a final note, don't forget to tell guests what you are doing to be environmentally responsible.





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