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Most people won't feel good about a vacation if they know it's adding to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a stretch of trash piling up in the ocean for thousands of miles. Nor will they feel positive about booking a vacation connected with an organization known for disregarding a local economy's well-being. The idea of enjoying oneself at the expense of others' meeting their basic needs doesn't sit well with most people. Sustainability — the mindful use of a resource so that it isn't used up or damaged — plays a vital role in the hospitality industry. Hospitality organizations' success depends on their preserving the natural and cultural attractions that compel tourists to visit their destinations. Not doing so has consequences. In 2018, the Thai government shut down one of its most famous beaches, Maya Bay, for three years after daily visits of 5,000 tourists ended up destroying most of its coral and threatening the very beauty that drew people to the area in the first place. Local tourism operators went out of business. With the right leadership, hospitality organizations can adopt sustainable business strategies. Sustainability-minded hospitality leaders can also improve efficiency and attract a growing number of customers looking for environmentally and socially responsible products and services. Pursuing an online leadership and management degree or certificate can prepare professionals to lead their organizations to success through sustainability in hospitality. Why Sustainability in Hospitality Matters "All tourism relies on the natural and cultural resources that attract tourists and act as the main driver of growth and development in the tourism economy. Some destinations, such as those in the Caribbean, rely on pristine beaches and crystal clear waters to bring in tourists. Others, such as Paris, rely on their cultural heritage—architecture, museums, cuisine—to drive tourist visits," explains Sergio Alvarez, assistant professor at the University of Central Florida's Rosen College of Hospitality Management. "As diverse as these destinations may seem, they all share one thing in common: the attractions that make them world-class destinations are threatened by human activity, and in many cases, tourism itself is a main threat to these attractions." Sustainable practices make hospitality organizations stand out. Today's travelers, restaurant patrons, hotel bookers and shoppers care about sustainability. They want to know that the companies they give their business to follow environmentally, socially and culturally sound practices. An overwhelming majority of millennials and Generation Zers will pay more for products and services that don't harm the environment, deplete natural resources, or negatively affect the lives of people or wildlife. As a case in point, a Nielson study found that nearly 75% of the respondents from these younger generations are willing to take action to support this attitude. A growing number of people from older generations also want companies to become environmental stewards. In fact, the Nielson study found that 51% of baby boomers will spend more for sustainable products and services as well. To stand out, hospitality organizations can focus on a few key aspects: Conserving Energy Energy conservation in the hospitality industry entails a two-pronged approach: reduction and efficiency. Organizations can start by training employees in behaviors that reduce energy use. These behaviors can range from turning off lights to changing the settings on washing machines and adjusting thermostats appropriately. Energy conservation may also include friendly reminders to guests about their use of towels or electricity. For efficiency, organizations can look for opportunities to use green technology or products. For example, they can install solar panels for heating and cooling or switch to energy-efficient LED lights. Reducing Waste Organizations have numerous opportunities to limit their waste. To cut down on food waste, companies can source their food locally or grow it on site. This reduces how much food spoils and ensures fresher products. Businesses can also adopt food-donation policies that let patrons know unused food will make it to the local food kitchen as opposed to just being discarded. Installing water-efficient products, such as water-saving filters, can also make a difference in reducing waste. Using Organic Amenities "At a global level, tourism is responsible for 8% of carbon emissions, which are causing changes in our climate and rising sea levels," notes Alvarez. "Tourism's substantial carbon footprint is not only caused by transportation of tourists, but also by the production and transportation of supplies such as food, beverages, towels and linens that are a must-have in every hotel." Organic products leave a lighter carbon footprint than others. By switching to organic, businesses demonstrate a commitment to sustainability. Organic amenities can include products made of all-natural ingredients and no harsh chemicals. For example, hotel toiletries, cleaning supplies, food and fragrances can all come in organic forms. Additionally, organizations can choose products that come in recyclable packaging or biodegradable cartons. Incorporating sustainable strategies into how an organization operates not only makes a good impression and potentially saves money; it can also protect the natural and cultural attractions guests have come to see. The hospitality industry must ensure it works in harmony with the environment and is mindful of its social and economic impact by not overconsuming resources, working to conserve biodiversity, not polluting, and respecting local communities and workers. In doing so, the industry protects its very existence. For this reason and others, sustainable tourism has emerged. This practice showcases the environment and focuses on protecting ecological processes and conserving a location's natural heritage. It also shows respect to host communities and works toward building cultural understanding with them. The Benefits of Sustainability in Hospitality Practicing sustainability in hospitality comes with many benefits. Aside from attracting more customers and responding responsibly to what many consider a moral imperative, in light of the current climate crisis, sustainable initiatives offer hospitality businesses incentives. The federal government, along with states and some local governments, have enacted several programs to promote "green" business. Using renewable energy, reducing waste and implementing measures that enable reuse and recycling can add up to more than just energy conservation. Incentive programs reward businesses with tax write-offs, discounts on insurance premiums, financial grants and faster regulatory permitting. In addition, innovative, environmentally friendly technology can result in long-term cost savings. Though sustainable practices can require initial spending, the combined effects of energy efficiency, waste reduction and the like can lead to spending less money in the long run. Many hospitality organizations have adopted sustainability plans. This intentional approach involves incorporating sustainable practices that reach across all business operations. Sustainability plans can help improve brand image. Most consumers care about sustainability, according to a recent Trip Advisor survey. It found that 62% of travelers had opted for more environmentally friendly hotels, food and transportation, and 69% of survey respondents said they intended to make even more environmentally responsible travel choices in the future. In tourism, for instance, people often vote with their feet. If tourists learn that a business does not take the necessary steps to eliminate or significantly reduce its negative impact on the environment, this information will affect their perception of the company brand. Conversely, when organizations demonstrate their commitment to green practices, they can improve their brand image and draw more tourists. Additionally, business cultures that embrace sustainability can also better attract the elite work talent of younger generations looking for companies who share their values. The Role of Leadership in Sustainability How can the hospitality industry ensure it fully embraces sustainability? Leaders in this sector can play a key role by integrating sustainability concepts into their business goals and strategies. Establishing Energy Management Programs First, hospitality leaders can put energy management programs into place. These programs can involve creating a team responsible for setting up energy conservation plans with specific goals. For example, the team might strive to reduce the company's energy use by 10% within a year. To help reach the goals, leaders might reward departments or individuals in the organization for reaching their milestone objectives. Evaluating Energy Usage Leaders can take another important action toward sustainability: determining how their businesses use energy. A clear understanding of energy usage allows leaders to identify areas for improvement. For example, in what area of a hotel is the most energy being used? Are there ways to reduce energy use in that area without negatively affecting guest experience? Additionally, leaders can routinely evaluate their energy use, seeking out energy-saving practices to improve efficiency and ultimately cut costs. Embracing Renewable Energy Besides reducing energy consumption and evaluating how energy is used in their businesses, hospitality leaders can reduce their business' carbon footprint by embracing renewable sources of energy. In addition to building their brand image as a sustainable hospitality business, these investments pay off by reducing operational costs. For instance, back in 2015, the La Quinta Inn & Suites in Danbury, Connecticut, installed 400 solar panels on the property's rooftops to generate 132,000 watts of solar electricity. By 2016, the property was saving approximately \$1,500 a month in its energy bill, in addition to receiving approximately \$16,000 in sales of electricity back to the grid. Educating Employees Sustainability in business requires a group effort. Educating employees and raising awareness about sustainable practices should play a part in onboarding and ongoing training. Every aspect of a business can adopt practices that take sustainability into account, considering such things as water and waste management, the use of organic products that do not contain harmful chemicals, and reuse and recycling. In this way, sustainability can become a part of an organization's culture. Directing an organization toward sustainability requires key skills. Hospitality leaders must inspire the people in their organizations to embrace sustainability as they work toward meeting expectations. To do this, hospitality leaders must excel in open communication, clear goal setting, positivity, teamwork, and being open to new ideas. Challenges and Trends While sustainability in hospitality offers clear advantages, professionals in this industry must still overcome challenges to build sustainable strategies. For one, they must correct misconceptions that sustainability costs more money and that consumers do not care about it, when in fact becoming more energy-efficient saves money and developing a brand known as sustainable attracts more patrons. Advances in technology related to renewable energy have also lowered the costs for using sources such as solar or geothermal energy. Additionally, tour operators who protect ecosystems that serve as their main attraction, while cooperating with and supporting local economies and culture, also win financially in the long run. Some organizations worry sustainable practices can disrupt guest experience. However, if organizations carefully focus on what guests need and customize their services accordingly, they can improve this aspect of their business. Hersh Hospitality Trust, which owns 48 upscale hotels, has instituted sustainability initiatives that actually enhance customer experience, including: Smart thermostat technology in each room that allows guests to customize temperatures while lowering energy use Recycling options in guest rooms that allow guests to maintain their green habits while away from home Locally sourced foods and products that allow guests to support local vendors and try something unique to the area Free access to bicycles that allow guests to both get around and explore the new area while reducing their carbon footprints Hospitality leaders can incorporate other current and emerging trends into their sustainability strategies, such as: Eliminating single-use plastic Creating paperless environments Sourcing from sustainable suppliers Purchasing green cleaning supplies Developing recycling programs Explore How to Become a Hospitality Leader in Sustainability "It is clear that tourism causes problems. However, leaders in hospitality and tourism have the power to be part of the solution, rather than being a part of the problem," says Alvarez. "The three pillars of sustainability — social, environmental, and economic — provide a roadmap for visionary leaders to transform their businesses and ensure that our cherished natural and cultural attractions are available for future generations of tourists to enjoy." The growing importance of sustainability in hospitality is obvious. Today's hospitality organizations need leaders who can help implement sustainable practices and build a culture of social, environmental and economic responsibility. The University of Central Florida offers the following degree and certificate programs that prepare graduates to thrive in different areas of the industry: Explore how the University of Central Florida's online leadership and management degrees and certificates can help aspiring hospitality leaders pursue their professional goals.

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