

Beyond Bamboo Straws: How to elevate the sustainability of your meetings and events starting today

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Emma Woodhouse: Good morning. Good afternoon. Good evening. Wherever you are in the world. Welcome to Business Travel on the fly. I'm Emma Woodhouse. In today's episode, we're going to be talking about sustainability in the meetings and events phase. We have three incredible guests joining us, each bringing their unique perspective on how we make gatherings more eco friendly and socially responsible. And and also we will discuss what the future looks like for sustainability in this space. So without further ado, our first guest is Kit Aspen, a climate tech entrepreneur and founder of Thrust Carbon, a carbon intelligence platform that recently launched an amazing calculator, specifically for the meetings and events sector. Welcome Kit.

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Kit Aspen: Thanks so much for having me today.

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Emma Woodhouse: Great to have you. And our second guest is Rachel Lunderberg. Rachel leads global process and technology for global agencies, CWT meetings and events, and worked closely with Kitt and trust carbon on launching and delivering the platform allowing detailed environmental impact insights to event planners and clients alike. Welcome, Rachel.

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Rachel Lunderborg: Thank you, excited to be here.

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Emma Woodhouse: Thank you. And our final guest is Rachel Munns, head of sustainability at World Wise Foods, that supply responsibly sourced products to major retailer and manufacturing partners supplying a whopping 30 million plus units globally. Welcome, Rachel.

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Rachel Munns: I am pleased to be here.

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Emma Woodhouse: Great to have you. From major conferences to trade shows, expos and group travel, meetings and events can be pretty wasteful. One study claims that the events industry is responsible for 10% of global emissions. But the industry is also one of the hardest to understand and materially reduce impact. There are so many data strands for one, right, there's travel, hotels days, meeting space, and food and beverage. But at the same time, demand for face to face meetings is growing and rightly so, right? Humans need connection, especially after the pandemic. And especially given that workforces are dispersed. CWT is handling double the in person events. Now, as I said, it's companies want to facilitate greater collaboration. I think, Rachel, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but we managed to 2.2 million people attending 15,810 events in 2022. And now this year is on track to double that out but organizing more than 30,000 meetings and events, which is pretty impactful on the planet. But it's also potentially an opportunity to change the status quo on how events are planned. So maybe Kit, we will start with you. Sustainability is obviously top of the agenda for everyone. But it's also pretty perplexing. So maybe for listeners who don't know, what is, or tell us about Thrust Carbon, and also this meetings and events calculator.

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Kit Aspen: Yeah, absolutely. So at Thrust Carbon, we're ultimately on a mission to make travel effortlessly green. We see the wonders of travel around the world. Certainly once enough where we can, we can meet colleagues, we can meet family and you know, often that involves travel. But to get to a world where we can be more sustainable, it has to be easy and straightforward. And we have to break through all the numbers and statistics and so forth. And so that's what we aim to do. So we have a number of sustainability tools. And a very proud partnership with CWT. And this is the next evolution of that. So Thrust events is a meetings and events calculator designed for large programs, which is why I work with CWT as just said, and a huge number of events last year and more coming this year. And really helping to make it as simple as possible to really break through those numbers to crunch the numbers and to get the data in one place. Because everything starts with data, reducing emissions, you have to know what you're going to reduce. And so that's where we start. And once we've got great data, we can start to give really pragmatic advice on how to reduce those. Yeah, it's been a lot of fun. We co built this tool with CWT and another TMC and really solving customer problems as we've done. So which is just a great place to build a product.

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Emma Woodhouse: Excellent, excellent. I mean, you must be seeing, you talk about data, they must be staring at a problem partly, you know, there's so many different strands, but you must be seeing quite a lot of difference and variables, right? It's not quite so straightforward as other categories. And I know that this tool can, you know, there's managed sustainability for events of 200 and also 50,000 Plus attendees, you know, what kind of differences do you see, across the board?

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Kit Aspen: Yeah, it's interesting. So, you know, on average for most events, travel is about 90% of the emissions of the event, but equally the variation is still huge. I mean, if you're holding a consumer event, like a, like a comic con, for example, actually, people don't travel as far for that, they're normally attendees attending from the same city, in which case, travel emissions much lower, because they tend to take public transport a lot more. Whereas a trade show a conference, people might be flying all over the world for. So the differences can be huge, and therefore, the tools to reduce carbon emissions, and obviously, plastics and every other areas sustainability end up changing a lot more. Because actually, if people are traveling locally, that's very sustainable. But if people are flying in, maybe you want to choose a venue, that's a location for a venue that's halfway between where everyone travels in from, for example. So I definitely think that's one big area. And then another area is around food, beverage and waste, where we're seeing a lot more trends of kind of breaking out of the the old school ideas of what food and beverage has to look like for an event. The old idea was if you're putting on a fancy event, you have to have a steak course, and red meat. Unfortunately, for from an admissions perspective, this is about as high as you can get. So but I think attendees really appreciate more creative menus, locally sourced food, it just makes a better story. It's a lot less simple, in a good way. So a lot of variation.

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Emma Woodhouse: Excellent. Yeah, I suppose that there's a data, but then there's also kind of how did you creatively manage that and reduce the impact? And, you know, again, it's kind of early days, what are the biggest challenges at the moment? It's kind of a broad question...

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Kit: It is. No, it's a great question, though. I think the challenge is the timeline. I think everyone would like the events industry, like, like most industries to just be completely netzero, tomorrow to stop using, to stop having any waste tomorrow. And you know, that'll be lovely. The reality is that there has to be a transition time. Trade Shows, conferences are incredible places for business to get done. And we can't just stop all of these things from happening, because the global economy would slow, supply chains would slow, they're really important events. So it's that timeframe of okay, what can we do today? How can we make our footprint less today? And how do we get somewhere? That's much better in five years, how about in 10 years and creating that journey? And that's difficult, especially as often you're reliant on suppliers, and then it's a question of what are they going to do? And then they're talking to their suppliers about what they're going to do. So it's, it's tough.

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Emma Woodhouse: Thank you. Yes, thank you. And you know, Rachel, our clients are also, many of them, at the beginning of their journey. Now the tool has been live for two months. Can you talk us through an example scenario?

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Rachel Lunderborg: Absolutely. As you mentioned earlier, here at CWT, we support a wide array of meetings and events globally, right, we support product launches to Industry trade shows, internal meetings, this industry in itself just has an extremely broad audience and a global reach. And it's that reach that really puts us in a unique position to influence and promote a different way of thinking and really support that transition to more of a circular economy, right? One where we produce, use and recycle versus merely taking and disregarding. This tool has been a really great addition to our tech stack, because it makes emissions easy to measure and in a global standardized way. So if we consider an example. So we have an event with 100 attendees, the meeting is operating over three days. It's happening in the UK, we of course, need meeting space, we need food and beverage and things to that degree. And we begin to assess our options. And so our first option, or maybe our first choice would be Hey, we're going to travel first class, we're going to stay in a five star hotel. And we're looking to secure meeting space and equipment for that event, as well. And so then if we look to our next option, we realize that we actually could take rail, we have that as an option. We could stay in in the middle to your hotel. And in reality, we really only need half the meeting space, we could be successful with that. And so we're able to plug in these metrics or these components into the tool to assess and measure the impact of both scenarios. We, of course, see that option number two allows us to reduce our footprint by about 500 times. So it really allows us to make decisions that are responsible, and that reduce those negative impacts that would have been caused with our first choice. And I think that's a really powerful story.

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Emma Woodhouse: Oh, fantastic. This is great. You know, and also, from a tech perspective, exciting times, you know, the collaboration with Thrust is obviously making a meaningful difference. I'm kind of curious from your perspective, as if you were on the cusp of huge change, right, with AI, etc. How can production tech solve for that for the biggest issues and sustainability? And will they accelerate going forward?

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Rachel Lunderborg: Yeah, absolutely. That's a great question. You know, I think that product and technology can solve for some of the biggest obstacles or the biggest issues through continued partnership. From you know, it's through that partnership, where event agencies can tap into new and emerging tech, usually, it's more cost effective than building in house right, and it enables us to move quicker to be more responsive. And at the same time, tech startups can gain access to the experience that those agencies have in that industry, they can tap into their customer base,

allowing them to scale those products faster, and in a way that has market relevance. You know, we heard Kit mentioned that it timeline is a challenge. And I think that partnership helps us remove some of the barriers from that point of view. And now if I think about even just that the AI side of things, right, I think this is going to help us scale faster and break down those obstacles as well. We can leverage it to sort and analyze data. And as more data becomes available, we can easily assess and analyze those behaviors, uncover opportunities, and really create a positive impact. So I think that there's just a tremendous amount of opportunity here.

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Emma Woodhouse: Great, I'm very glad to hear it. So now that we know we're accelerating change, and we have all this amazing data at our fingertips. What is next? How do we leverage that data? How do we go beyond reporting carbon emissions, that might be for both you and Kitt. So either one of you.

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Rachel Lunderborg: I can jump in first. You know, I think in this space, overall, there's just a great opportunity to be more proactive versus reactive. I totally agree with Kit that it all starts with data, right? Data gives us a baseline to measure and monitor. And we all know that it's the things that get measured that gets improved upon. So collecting data is really step one. And then it's really about what's that data telling us? Do you have an opportunity to reduce foodways to work with your supply chain and identify more sustainable options? Or can you simply use that historical intelligence to post to really support future decision making during your sourcing process? I think that data just really unlocks that opportunity.

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Emma Woodhouse: Thanks. Kit, you have anything to add?

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Kit Aspen: Yeah. I mean, I completely agree. Right. And the thing I think I'd add is, making more sustainable decisions, using data to make more sustainable decisions, I think also makes for better events, and especially attendee engagement. So you know, really good examples. And easy wins for many events are what do you do with the waste from an event, you know? Food waste, you can tell your attendees, it goes in the trash, or they can see it being put in the trash. Or you can donate spare food to food banks, and attendees love to hear that story. You know, they love to hear the story of how essentially them attending an event has helped feed people. And a similar idea is, particularly in the UK, there's a great charity called Event cycle. They take any kind of spare items for an event, you know, whatever that may be, and then they find charities locally who would like to take them. And again, that's such a great way of enabling reuse and creates a story that attendees can connect to. So it's, yeah, and you know, if your hosting an event that's more

accessible for attendees to get to and therefore, lower overall emissions. That's also a win too, because they want to get to an event that's easier to get to and you're probably going to get more attendees because it's easier to get to. So it's just yeah, the alignment, I think it's really interesting. And it's not just tick the green box, it's actually make your event better by thinking about sustainability.

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Emma Woodhouse: There is also a study that says that the f&b waste generated by trade shows alone globally, there is an estimated 30% of the food goes to waste. So something like that it makes a massive difference at scale, right? So, Rachel, you're all about to sustainable sourcing and supply chains. And we know that it plays a critical role. Maybe you could tell us, what is sustainable sourcing? And why does it matter?

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Rachel Munns: Great question. I guess to put it simply, sustainable sourcing is the consideration of social and environmental factors when selecting your suppliers. But it's not perhaps as easy said is done. Food supply chains are often long and complicated. So the checklist, shall I say, of the things you need to be asking when you're conducting due diligence of your suppliers is long. So if you were to think about a can of tuna, for example, you might be thinking about what the catch method was for that fish. As well as the labor using the factory that is going to carry that product, as well as then the means in which you're transporting that product from A to B, and Kit's already kind of referenced about long supply chains and the emissions associated with that. So there's a really long list of things you're going to be looking at when you start to think about sustainable sourcing for both people and planet perspective.

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Emma Woodhouse: That's great. I just read a study by GBTA that found that 76% of travel buyers alone, they are adding sustainability clauses to their supplier contracts. So what should meetings and events planners and buyers look for from their suppliers and maybe even including in contracts?

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Rachel Munns: I think that's firstly, a really fantastic step. I think, you know, commercial has a huge amount of leverage in those discussions. So to put it there, central into contracts, yet really demonstrates the importance of that to the final buyer. I think it's important to be asking questions in those early stages of what due diligence they undertake, from a both environmental and social perspective. So does the company or sourcing from have a sustainability manager or human rights manager? What is their expertise and understanding of the risk, and actually, when we're working with factories or suppliers, when those companies are really transparent with us

about the risks, it gives us greater assurance that they are going to be taking the necessary action to prevent those risks coming into practice. I think that when you have suppliers that don't have the information readily available, the data to backup, perhaps working hours or, you know, full visibility of their own supply chains, that's when I think you can start to feel uncomfortable that they might not have enough evidence that the right practices are in place.

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Emma Woodhouse: Right, right. Right. Right. Yeah, I understand that. And you're so, you're very often on the ground as well, aren't you? I think as always that you're a fishery, you must be seeing quite a lot of positive impact to local food producers and communities when we source sustainably.

18:14

Rachel Munns: Yeah, I'm super fortunate to travel, travel a lot in my job and spend a lot of time out in Asia, I think perhaps the photo you're referring to is me catching pollen line tuna on a fissure. I think we're in the Maldives, which is not not a bad days work. I mean, it's really interesting to get into the detail of the people in the community supporting food supply chains. And I think it's very easy for us to sit in the UK or wherever in the world, we are in our products, in our dinners and not necessarily considered the amount of labor that goes into getting that product onto a supermarket shelf or onto a menu at an event. And yeah, I think it's really important that we start asking us consumers more questions about those people in those environments to make sure they are being treated fairly.

19:02

Emma Woodhouse: I think that's probably happening too, in terms of, you know, employees, especially younger employees are often asking these questions of the events that they attend, and indeed their own employers, right? It's pretty critical. And actually, you know, that's my question, another question is how do we create a groundswell around supplying, you know, around, you know, sustainable sourcing, and supply chains? You know, and I know that, you know, it depends, you know, in various industries and geographies are at different stages of the journey.

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Rachel Munns: I think you're definitely right to recognize that sustainability is at the forefront of people's minds. And I think we all need to kind of jump on that bandwagon and make sure that it becomes the norm in which the way we do business kind of plays out. I think we should not underestimate the impact that we can all have as individuals. So by asking those questions, by making slightly more sustainable choices, maybe not in every meal, but on occasion, thinking about if you're buying locally or if you're buying less meat based products, and I think that

demand, the more we can create a demand for sustainability, the more that then we start to see the impact from the ground.

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Emma Woodhouse: Yeah, that's interesting. Although, you know, sometimes I think we have intentions, but they aren't always there as we would like them to be. And I think especially given the kind of current climate, there was a survey, but it's also found that 30% of the public view aviation in the UK public view aviation is having a major impact on global warming at the same time, searches for cheap flights have increased threefold from last year to this year. So in our current climate, is it kind of falling by the wayside? Is there a push pull between having, you know, sustainable sourcing at the top of the agenda, and also vendors cutting costs?

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Rachel Munns: I think it's absolutely right to recognize that sustainability does have a price tag associated with it. And typically products that perhaps are sourced through a fair trade model, lots of people will be familiar with the fairtrade logo means that the product itself is more expensive. And I don't think you can avoid that conversation, particularly during this kind of cost of life living crisis that we're facing into. That said, There absolutely is an opportunity to create affordable sustainability. And I think that the more we encourage sustainability to be the norm, the more that kind of model of sustainability becomes scalable. So yeah, I don't think all hope is lost. But it's absolutely right to recognize that for some people, they just can't make at this stage those those slightly more premium choices when they're shopping, or they're purchasing goods.

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Emma Woodhouse: Okay, yeah. Thank you. And this is a broad question anyone is free to answer is that looking beyond everything that we talked about and everything in fact, that's kind of measurable. I mean the venues, suppliers, sustainable sourcing, are there other aspects to consider to boost sustainability and events? You know, it might be for example, choosing a particular destination or see CSR initiatives, I would love to hear from any of you for some ideas around around that.

22:09

Kit Aspen: It's a funny one. And I guess, I mean, ultimately, everything in the events industry comes back to suppliers. So it's still on point. But really choosing destinations, for example, that may be certified. So the destinations can be certified as one of the lesser known forms of sustainable certifications. But for example, the global Sustainable Tourism Council, has a certification scene for destinations. And that can be a really good way of also choosing but also sending a signal to the market that actually, we want this to be prioritized to every level. And particularly when it comes to destinations, it's sending a signal to governments that they should

try and enable their destination to be more sustainable, because they're the ones that would get that certification. The other option, of course, is hybrid events. We're big fans of hybrid events, it has the benefits of people meeting. But that also means that sometimes people just can't come to an event, life gets in the way. And being hybrid enables them to attend as well. It can be tough to get it right. It's hard, obviously to get as much of the engagement with a hybrid event. But that challenge is were part of the fun is, that the best hybrid events are actually really, really fun. So it almost becomes a different challenge as and organizer, but one that adds to your event.

23:46

Emma Woodhouse: Excellent. Yeah, I think we've come a long, long way from those early days of the pandemic, right. This is all taking off. Things have evolved. Thanks, Kit. Yeah. And also, I think coming back to the corporate sector, private sector. And I think also everyone is always looking out for issues of greenwashing is, can traditionally unsustainable industries, make more sustainable choices?

24:13

Rachel Lunderborg: You know, I think we can. I think Kit, if I recall, you had a really great example, there locally in regards to energy week in London.

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Kit Aspen: Yeah, absolutely. So I mean, it's, as we said earlier, 90% of events emissions are going to be travel from the attendees. So a great way of reducing those emissions is to make sure events are combined, combined with events effectively run by competitors. And so London energy week is a good example. It is fundamentally a conference for oil and gas execs, show that argue it's also renewables but really, it's oil and gas. And, but you know, ultimately, they're all coming to London for one then rather than 50 separate events, and that's, that's enabling the emissions on a per event basis really to be divided by 50. So to speak. So it's a great example of actually where even an unsustainable industry can really make a great movement towards cutting down.

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Emma Woodhouse: Thank you. Thank you. It's great to have all three of you, doing such important work in this space. I would like to get to the closing by asking you a question, which is that I'm going to start with all three of you. Kit, I might start with you, because you just spoke. If you had a magic wand, what one thing would you wish for to contribute to a livable more sustainable future?

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Kit Aspen: It's difficult going fast. I think, honestly, it would actually be more government investment in options such as high speed rail. It's a great way for people to still travel, but also to cut down on emissions. It has a great longevity. When Japan expanded its high speed rail lines in the 70s and 80s, I think there was a lot of backlash. And time has now told us all that Japan's rail system is one of the wonders of the world, in my opinion. And so my magic wand would be governments kind of leading the way. Because in essence, only they can actually create some of the sustainable infrastructure that's needed.

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Emma Woodhouse: Yeah. And the regulation too, right. As as we are seeing, for example, France recently.

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Kit Aspen: Right, and this goes back to your point with Rachel around around fair trade and the green premium. Sometimes governments just need to say, actually, we're not okay with modern slavery ever being in a supply chain, and therefore everyone has to pay a green premium. Because it won't mean there's slavery, which is one thing we should never have, even though it might be cheaper. So yeah, regulation around this stuff is so important.

27:23

Emma Woodhouse: Thank you. I'm moving on to you, Rachel. Kitt, your name should really be Rachel, I have to say. Rachel, in the back, yeah, from you. If you had a magic wand, what one thing would you wish for?

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Rachel Lunderborg: You know, I wish that I would say that everyone really taking a moment, taking the time to take the initiative to understand how they can be an advocate and a voice of change. You know, I would just say in closing that it starts with you, right? It starts with each and every one of us.

27:56

Emma Woodhouse: And Rachel, from you. If you have a magic wand.

28:00

Rachel Munns: As I've only got one wish, I think I'll go nice and bored. And just say that, I would hope that the barriers to us advancing the sustainability agenda are removed. So Kit speaks about

legislation, we've spoken earlier about cost, maybe people's motivation. Yeah, the removal of all those barriers. So all these fantastic ideas, all these fantastic tools that we have or utilized and enable us to really move forward at pace on this agenda.

28:29

Emma Woodhouse: As we wait for the ecosystem to improve and evolve, for a critical mass of governments to mandate and regulate, and for more transparent supply chains, hearing from our three sustainability experts, there are things that we can practically do today. And while it's difficult decision making, not all sustainable choices come with a higher price tag, like going meat free or traveling by train. And we can't underestimate the power of incremental change. I'm hearing that we can do a few things we can prioritize measuring and a global standardized way to influence and promote more sustainable choices boost engagement from your eco savvy employees and customers and continue to contribute to building a more circular economy. I'm also hearing that we can interrogate long supply chains, find out what due diligence or suppliers conduct from both the planet and people respect to that and check if they have credentials, like a sustainability manager or human rights manager with the data to back up any claims. Thirdly, lean on data, use it to compare benchmark and shape the future of your meetings and events programs. Thank you, Rachel Lunderberg, Rachel Munns and Kit Aspen and thank you listeners. To find out more about the future of work and travel from experts around the world, tune into business travel on the fly on Spotify, Apple podcast, Amazon, Google Play or wherever you get your podcasts.