

Certifications as A Pathway to Sustainable Events and Festivals

Executive Summary

April 16, 2020

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Events and festivals are gradually becoming more sustainable as an industry. Events typically produce several environmental, social and economic impacts. The most common impacts stem from emissions due to attendee travel and transportation of equipment, followed by food and single use product waste from vendors and attendees, as well as energy consumption. Festivals can damage the host venues' grounds and disrupt the soil, with the burden of reparations being placed on local taxpayers. Events often outsource staff and vendors, missing the opportunity to contribute to the local economy and incorporate the host community.

Some events are champions at operating sustainably and offsetting impacts. These industry leaders have gained marketable recognition, attracted more attendees, and highlighted their efforts through green certifications. Green certifications give credibility to events operating sustainably and recognize voluntary efforts of event management teams to reduce their event's negative impacts. There are many certifications to choose from, but most event and festival managers do not have time to learn what each certification contains. Even if they allot time, it may not be obvious which certification best fits them based on their sustainability values.

FestEval was designed to cut back search time and assist event management teams in differentiating green certifications based on their desires and values. The tool breaks down the involvement of five sustainability principles inspired by Gibson's principles within six green certifications. The tool is designed for independent use by event and festival management teams or sustainability consultants with accompanying guidelines and visuals. The guidelines contain terms that are universally understood; keeping in mind the audience applying this tool outside of the sustainability community. An important learning objective of this project was to investigate which sustainability principles are present in green certification literature and where there are gaps or principles missing.

My project partner Meghan Tierney from Kilowatt Events envisioned this tool being very useful for Kilowatt Events in assisting their clients in selecting a green certification. She believes this tool has potential to grow and develop over time as more certifications become available. The tool holds the potential to advance the understanding of green certifications in the event industry, identify the current gaps, recommend solutions, and further sustainability practices in the events industry.

The primary method for analyzing the six certifications and building FestEval was performing a qualitative assessment on the guidelines or elements of each certification's guide or checklist. Within a certification, the occurrences of principles were tallied, and percentages calculated to show comparatively which principles are heavily involved and which are less involved. Two objective

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auditors provided independent oversight of the percentages and rankings for the certification elements. We referred to agreed upon “Key Terms” commonly used in event and festival literature to guide our rankings for consistency. The key terms each correlated with a principle, sometimes more than once. After ranking the guidelines in the six certifications, we reviewed any discrepancies we had in rankings until coming to agreement. Pie charts illustrating the involvement of principles within each certification accompany the decision-making tool for smoother interpretation.

Percentages within FestEval clarified which sustainability elements are present and which are less involved. The three university green certifications relied heavily on the first principle of sustainability, Viability or Integrity of Ecosystems, over the other principles. The three national/international certifications had a more evenly distributed involvement of the five principles of sustainability. This suggests there is room to improve green certifications by including the fifth principle of sustainability which currently has very little explicit involvement.

Meghan Tierney reviewed this tool and responded with positive feedback. The tool was not able to be directly applied to an event since events aren’t operating due to Covid19. She made suggestions for additional terms commonly used in the industry as well as the layout of the Key Terms list. A second version of this tool will be developed shortly and offered to Kilowatt Events and other event companies for use.

The main challenge for this project was the interpretation of the certification’s guideline data. The auditors and I looked for explicit mention of the key words related to sustainability principles within the guidelines and rated the certifications based on the number of occurrences observed. We did not include a qualitative analysis on materials provided such as annual reports, information packets, and “about us” pages due to time restrictions. The opportunities that surfaced during this project include finding additional certifications and meeting several more sustainable management companies with whom tool could be shared. There is room for further evaluation of the certifications and further development of FestEval. The tool is one of many pieces that can lead the events industry towards operating more sustainably.

The principle breakdowns and percentages as well as Meghan Tierney’s feedback allows me to interpret the success of this tool to the best of my abilities. Meghan has identified clients interested in certification and envisions this tool assisting them when events and festivals are operating again. FestEval could not be pilot tested due to the spread of Covid19 and shut down of the events and festivals industry, and will be tested when the industry is back in operation.

Green certifications could improve by shifting away from heavy reliance on Integrity of Ecosystems and balancing certification principles more evenly; including long-term sustainability.