

Abena Fairweather & Iga Prokopowicz

Nik Gowing

Welcome to talking about, Thinking the Unthinkable. Our latest leadership, conversation, and podcast. I'm Nik Gowing, Founder and Director of the Thinking the Unthinkable project.

In all our work, we always want to use examples to encourage leaders to think and act dramatically differently. Everyone needs to adapt to the new realities and unthinkables created by the urgent sustainability challenge, and to change very fast.

So how to achieve that? Well, in our 18 minutes of this podcast, I want to introduce you to a small, fast growing company that intrigues us. It encourages leaders to think and act differently for everything they do. And they succeed.

If you organise or attend conferences, how much do you question, everything that goes into prepping the gathering? That's what Legacy Events does. They challenge and question everything people assume is needed for an event? The findings, and the outcomes are remarkable.

We want to hear why. So joining me is Abena Fairweather, a remarkable former Space Scientist in the US, who became a Sustainability Consultant. She is the Founder and Managing Director of Legacy Events. Also Iga Prokopowicz, who is Abena's Sustainable Events Manager. She tells clients what they think they want, is not sustainable.

So having a let me start with you. How massive is this challenge, particularly around the events industry?

Abena Fairweather

It's a huge challenge for so many reasons. One is that there are hundreds, thousands, millions of events that are held every day, exhibitions, conferences on all kinds of scales. And they have an impact on everything from, emissions from transport, to social issues, and the communities that they're held, back through to water use. So they really affect sustainability across, across the issues that we're facing.

The second major challenge, I think, is that events aren't really seen as part of the problem at the moment, they're a little bit under the radar. And so when companies are talking about their net zero strategies, or their ways of dealing with the climate emergency or biodiversity challenge, they're very, very rarely speaking to their events, colleagues.

And so at the moment, there isn't really a cohesive strategy for how we're going to decarbonise the events industry, or just make it more sustainable generally.

Nik Gowing

Do you think people who go to events really understand what you're saying?

I've got a figure here of 1.2 billion kilos of CO2 dispensed every year, just for these kinds of events. But that's a massive amount of CO2, carbon dioxide.

Abena Fairweather

It is, it is huge. And actually, probably the greatest impact of the events industry is the travel. But I think the most visible side of the unsustainable nature of events at the moment is the waste that you see. So I don't know if any, any of you have ever seen around the back of the ExCel Centre, or an exhibition centre.

Nik Gowing

In London.

Abena Fairweather

See how much goes to ..in London, how much goes to landfill, all that merchandise that's given away. It's hugely wasteful. And that's really the most visible aspects, I think of the unsustainable nature of the industry. But very few people think about, perhaps the ecology issues, or the carbon issues, or the food and drink issues that surround events.

Nik Gowing

How much do you think you're really trying to, really change mindsets on this? In other words, people like us who think about sustainability, go to conferences, but don't think about the sustainable nature of the conference they're attending.

Abena Fairweather

It's a really great question. A lot of people think the answer is virtual events, maybe events are unimportant considering the damage they're doing. Maybe we should just stop going to events. I disagree with that.

I think events are hugely important to achieve the kind of transformational change that we're going to have to achieve to solve some of these problems. Bringing people together is really the best way that humans have found to deal with these challenges. So we have to gather, it's just about gathering in a more mindful way considering the impact of what we're doing. So that the gathering only has these positive outcomes. And it doesn't come with all of the negative aspects that we're currently seeing.

Nik Gowing

Now Iga, you actually talk to sales managers of hotels, at conference centers and so on. What are the kinds of things you face when you raise all this with them?

Iga Prokopowicz

I mean, part of the venue selection process for me as a sustainable Events Manager is, assessing the sustainability of the venue. So I have to ask the sales managers and the sales managers, have to come back to me with the answers about energy. What kind of energy is the venue using? Do they have LED lighting? You know, how do they conserve water, find out about their chain, in purchasing as well. So they need to kind of trigger all of those departments to come back to me. And if they want the deal they need to bring me the answers.

So if I get that sales manager, to start thinking about those sustainability questions, that's already part of my success, because he will then ask questions from, from different departments. And perhaps that will trigger some sort of change within their work not only for my event, but for other future events as well.

Nik Gowing

Are you often asking questions they'd never even thought about. In other words, they don't have the answers, even though sustainability is now increasingly important.

Iga Prokopowicz

Oh, yeah. Like from how is your pool heated? Or, you know, some, some hotels, there was one hotel that claimed that they use salt water. My colleague was so interested in it, that she actually went and try the water, she dipped her finger, and it was not saltwater. So we had to give them marked down from that. But yeah, there is, there is a lot of questions that we ask, from, you know, waste, to heating pool water and those sorts, so they need to go back and find out. So, you know, that's, that definitely triggers a change in thinking.

Nik Gowing

What about, for example, each bedroom? I mean, most hotels have 2 to 300, 400 beds, 400 bedrooms, air conditioning, and so on. What about that? Do they think about that? How much does that enter into your calculations acting for a client as to whether you should actually have a conference in his hotel?

Iga Prokopowicz

Absolutely, I mean, from our point of view, if we are putting 300 delegates into a hotel, I don't want that hotel or every single hotel bedroom to have the lights on when they enter, have the TV on when they enter, have the, have the aircon on, because, we just we just tend to leave them on. So from my perspective, I do to check before the guests arrive, if the bedroom is clean and suitable for them to stay in, also that it is sustainably suitable for them, as well.

So for that conference, I did happen once, which sales manager weren't very happy about, but I did my check. And turns out that all of the TVs are on in all of the 300 bedrooms, and they were about to be occupied. And I did ask them to go to and turn them off, there wasn't a central system to turn all of the TVs off. And they had to go to each bedroom and turn them off one by one, which was obviously very annoying, but I'm really hoping that from that they learned their lesson not to leave them on at all.

Nik Gowing

So Abena, what kind of shift do you think you're making already, you're small but growing fast, and you're having to tell people things which they probably have never thought about, as we've just heard from Iga.

What kind of shift you think you're making? because there are those who are watching this, leaders, C-suiters and others who say, I've never even thought about all this, I now need to be thinking about it.

Abena Fairweather

So, we're obviously bring in business to venues, to suppliers, so that gives us a certain amount of influence. So, by being the thorn in their side, as Iga says, and pestering about some of these issues, and being thorough about it as well. Like Iga says, we really don't, we'll go by rifling around in a venues bins to check that they are recycling in the way they have said.

It means that, once the venue in this case has gone through the hard work of meeting our standards, they might as well continue to do that because they know they have to change. So we're really that final catalyst, the final push to get a venue or supplier that has been thinking about what they need to do to really make the change. And we're happy to support as well. We're not just annoying, we do give advice and support to those suppliers who do, who do want to change.

So that's, that's one influence we're having. The other is, I think that, we run really good events. Events are better because they're more sustainable. And so that motivates and inspires other people to do the same.

We've had several occasions where we've bought out some innovation I suppose at an event. My favorites at the moment are these lanyards that we use for badges that are made from recycled paper. And they're still quite new bizarrely, in 2024. But people love them. And so by showcasing innovations like that for events, it brings those small suppliers to the to the market who wouldn't really be seen. And so it helps us raise the profile of smaller businesses but also show there are alternatives out there to some of the standard things that are being used in the events industry.

Nik Gowing

What about the scale of everything, Abena. Because the amount of food that's wasted for example, people expect food but actually a lot of people don't eat it, or they make other choices, and other things like pens, badges.

So many of these things, which actually, you know, could be recycled or not needed at all. In other words, much needed as well, much can be used as well from an app, you don't need to have the paper.

Are you making that massive kind of shift in terms of understanding? What makes a good conference and why it could be much better in a kind of, semi, virtual, hybrid way?

Abena Fairweather

Yeah, absolutely. And that's a key part of what we do as well, I can see Iga has got an example, so, I'll let her jump in.

Nik Gowing

Yeah, Iga.

Iga Prokopowicz

You know, for me is very obvious that everyone will carry a pen, the days where we were giving out pads and pens are long gone, at least for me. There's still you know, maybe one or two delegates per conference, that will come ask me for pad and a pen. And we always managed to find something for them.

But if you don't need it, why create more, you know, every single pen will end its life at some point, and it will end up probably in landfills, unfortunately. So, or note pads that we you know, many hotels put on the tables ready for the delegates, which is very convenient, someone makes a tiny little note and the whole pad will go into, into the bin.

So we, we avoid those and any other items that are really, I always say that if you can not reuse it, do you need it at all. So really avoiding any of the single use or short life items, which also makes the budget much more healthy. If you, if you don't get it, you will save money on that side as well.

Name

Food as well, which I raised with you?

Iga Prokopowicz

Yeah, absolutely. So a lot of venues tend to over cater massively. And also, it is very hard to predict the number of people that will actually show up to the event.

But by just under catering a little bit, you know, you can, you can get quite a good estimation, based on stats from knowing events, what, what amount of food you will need. So I tend to under cater a little bit for every single event, which again, is great for the budget.

But also, it will just save that waste, but also again having that backup plan. So in case you do have that food waste, I try to work with caterers and charities where you know, I can have that backup plan in case there is food waste, I will then make do my best to donate that foods to Salvation Army across the road, or it's for someone who actually needs that food. So having that plan B.

Abena Fairweather

I should say as well, we tried to be really thoughtful and considered about things. We don't just want events, sustainable events to be seen as these ordeals to be borne, that you're not allowed to have

anything. So we gave the example there of slightly under catering to counteract the fact that case was always over cater.

Another example, we found is that we might put a big screen up at an event to show the agenda, rather than printing out lots of agendas. And that big screen acts as a kind of water cooler, gathering point for delegates. So we found that people like to meet around the big screen and compare what sessions they're going to, to act as a meeting point. And so it really helps with that networking. And so it's not really, it's not all just about taking away your nice things. We do try and be very thoughtful in terms of the event design to make sure it is still a great event. Without some of these, this waste.

Nik Gowing

Broadly, as the person who sort of got this together, Abena. Should we really be shocked by how much we are not thinking about recycling, about more than single use? In other words, we're just taking it for granted. Are you changing the thinking about that, among those who, who tend to go to conferences?

Abena Fairweather

Yeah, I, definitely we are changing the thinking. We've had several examples of people who've been to one of our events, and then gone to, I suppose a normal event, and then commented on the difference in terms of how wasteful those other events are. And so you can only hope they're taking that new mindset to, to their organisations as well, to their event teams.

So absolutely, we're making a difference in the mindset when people see you can have a fantastic event that is sustainable as well. And that's the reason we organise the event so people can see it. And they don't have to read about it. It's not about stats, they can experience it for themselves, which really is what an event is about. It's about that experience and that experiential sense. So if someone comes to our events, and they can really feel it, that's so powerful.

Nik Gowing

What about the human side of this, Iga? Because obviously, in a conference centre, or in a hotel, there are staff? Do they understand it? Do they have to be educated, upskilled, whatever you want to call it, in order to think in a different way, because, presumably, they're just working for their employer and doing what their employer wants.

Iga Prokopowicz

I would say it is very unfortunate how, you know, I think all of us are very under educated in that area. And it's, it's not made easy for us all of, recycling policies around that especially, you know, different boroughs having different recycling policies on which bin to put items into. So it's really not made easy. But from, from my side, when I work with event managers on the venue side, or my suppliers, I do my best to actually explain to them as well, that it's even though you are using paper cups that technically can be recycled, they will, they're still waste. And you know, staying away from that making that simple change, just use ceramics rather than paper cups, don't serve your biscuits and wrappers for for

them, it's a hygienic point. For us, it's, you know, another pile of waste that we will have to deal with, or someone will have to deal with.

So, from through my work, I'm trying to do my best to educate them. And it's so great to see suppliers coming back to me like, oh, I've never thought about that. But you know, now nowadays, we're not using plastic packaging to transport our plants, or, you know, we're trying to think of how we deliver goods and items.

And, that's a big win for me, when I see that change happening within venues, suppliers or, you know, even single employees of different companies that they're actually oh, right, I can just, it's a no brainer but they've never thought about it before.

Nik Gowing

We've got three minutes left, let's end on a positive note. Do you think, Abena, that actually, you are rapidly changing the way people think to the point where it's now becoming fashionable, or will become fashionable quite quickly, to have conferences in a very different way? In the same way that people are now accepting that recycled or reused clothes is, is quite fashionable. In other words, there is a movement underway.

Abena Fairweather

I really do think that, one of the wonderful things about the events industry and people who work in the industry, is that they are hugely creative. They're huge, they can achieve so much. They're massive multitaskers, as well.

So I feel like. if you can get to those people and really inspire, inspire them, they can achieve a whole lot. So the fact I'm working in this wonderful industry, I think means that we can make a really big change. And also just bringing it onto the radar, like I mentioned at the beginning, of these companies who are setting out these ambitious targets, for sustainability, for net zero, putting them events on their radar can only result in good. So yes, I think we are changing quite quickly. For the better.

Nik Gowing

When conferences are advertised, people, people should be encouraged when it says, this is a sustainable conference, with many of the things you take for granted, no longer being there. But that's what we want to have at this kind of conference.

Abena Fairweather

Saying that if you look at a lot of conference websites now, you'll see a little tab about their sustainability, which wouldn't have existed a year and a half ago. So that shows how quickly we can come in, how far we can come in a year and a half. Where major conferences feel that they have to show their attendees and their guests that they're working on this issue. So absolutely we are we are making progress.

Nik Gowing

So Iga, final thought when you're dealing with a sales manager, give us an idea. And in the next minute, literally a minute, how do you actually convince them that they need to change and that this is good for them, good for their business, good for their conference centre, and ultimately good for the planet?

Iga Prokopowicz

I think they, they already see that in their inquiries, and they, a lot of sales managers keep coming back to me that they get more and more of these questions. And I can see that when I, when I talked to a lot of venue managers, that they. they already have that tab on sustainability, which is amazing, again, year and a half, two years ago, I would not have seen that.

But they can also, you know, when hen they try to apply those changes, they can show that impact on you know, the return of investment for their companies. So it's massive, because it will bring more clients in but also by, you know, making a sustainable change and you're building infrastructure, you will see return on investment, and then financially as well. So yeah, definitely, we're on a good path and sustainability at events. I just wanted to say there was a really good example that, it's not like, as an organisation, we're putting on an event, you know, maybe two, only two staff events a year so we can splash out and we don't have to worry about it. It's not like a cheat day in your diet, it's still, you know, it will hurt the planet.

So you might as well, do the right thing and do it sustainably from you know, from day one rather than, oh, but we're just, we're just doing it once or twice a year. So we don't have to worry about it, it's still you know, it's still a good change.

Nik Gowing

Abena, just tell us where you think this might have moved to in the next year and 18 months. I say that because when you think of it, a couple of years ago, we weren't even talking about nature, look how that has now gripped the agenda.

Abena Fairweather

In a year and 18 months, I want every client I speak to, to be really open to suggestions on, environmental sustainability, but also social sustainability, I don't want there to be any kind of upskilling needed.

I want them to be already engaged so that we can go on talking about how we can make them event the best event that's ever happened. I always want sustainability to be a boring part of the conversation. That's where I'd love to be in 18 months.

Nik Gowing

I wish we could talk for longer, but we've had 18 months, 18 minutes of allowance. So thank you very much indeed for giving us a real taste. And you can reference every detail we've heard from Abena and

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Iga, because we'll be, giving a transcript of this in parallel, so you can read through it and, also you can make contact with them.

Do please join us again, when we next have a conversation about Thinking the Unthinkable. You can see, the unthinkables don't have to be unthinkable. They are achievable.

From me, Nik Gowing. Until the next time, keep thinking unthinkables, more than ever, it's both possible and necessary, as we've heard from Abena and Iga. Bye, bye.