



Research shows 58% of consumers would prefer to stay in environmentally friendly accommodation

Illustration: Rob Patterson

Selling sustainability

In an ideal world, becoming sustainable should help both the planet and your business. So how do you go about implementing a green plan and successfully marketing that approach to customers?

According to VisitEngland data on English consumers, 58% of people would want to stay in accommodation with green awards and environmentally friendly practices. But where do you even begin with an approach that takes in everything from biomass boilers to locally sourced food? The answer, according to many accommodation providers, is to take it step by step. You don't need to start with a field of solar PV panels – even modest changes, added together, can make a big difference.

'You can start by recycling, or getting involved in community projects such as litter picking,' says Jane Pond from East View Farm Holiday Cottages near Norwich, a five-star gold-accredited business. 'You can also plant more trees for bees, buy local produce or cycle more. It all helps.'

Jane's passion for sustainability began in a fairly unusual way. 'It started with the

renovation of our barns into holiday cottages. We cleaned traditional bricks for re-use in the building work and it went from there. We didn't even need a skip, and so you realise that everything can go in a circle and be re-used, just in a different way. Now we are years on but still developing and looking for ways to be greener. Sustainability means thinking about what happens in the long term.

Saving money

The good news for business owners is that choosing a sustainable approach is likely to be a money-saver. Andrea Nicholas, managing director of the Green Tourism Programme, says becoming truly sustainable requires patience, but it will ultimately yield a higher profit margin.

'Sustainable tourism is important for businesses because it ensures their viability, both environmentally and

economically,' she says. 'Running a truly sustainable business is cheaper and more profitable than non-sustainable models.'

The savings you can make run into thousands of pounds. 'Many of our members see running-cost reductions of up to 20% in the first year,' says Andrea. 'A very large brand hotel told us that their six-figure electricity bill has been reduced by 60% by switching to LED lights, and they had not yet completed the process throughout the hotel. There are so many aspects to sustainable tourism and it is beneficial to everyone: consumers, owners, staff, the environment, wildlife.'

Crafting a message

Once you're taking steps to operate more sustainably, you'll definitely want to tell potential visitors about your efforts. A study of 14,000 people across seven countries by market researchers TNS

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» Global shows that 95% say protecting the environment is important to them personally. Meanwhile, the number of people buying environmentally friendly products more than doubled between 2007 and 2012. The same study also states that 70% of people surveyed in the UK would like more information on the environmental friendliness of brands.

So how do you go about marketing sustainability in a way that appeals to

customers? A good place to start is VisitEngland's fully updated Keep it Real toolkit. It has advice on ways to talk about sustainable credentials, from how to attract new customers to helping existing ones get excited about sustainability.

Dr Xavier Font is director of respondec, the responsible tourism communication service from Leeds Beckett University. He says that, while sustainable practices are very important, delivering the message to

your customers without sounding sanctimonious is a hard nut to crack.

'People often sound preachy, because the advice given by sustainability auditors and trainers has conditioned them to send "save planet earth" messages,' he says.

But, he adds, there are more subtle ways to get your message across. 'Practice sustainability, but avoid overly using the "S word". Instead, look at all the things you do that are sustainable, and break these down according to how they help the customer have a better experience. This way, you create a series of less intrusive, more relevant messages you can use along the customer journey, at different points.'

Dr Font believes making sustainability look normal, and telling visitors how their peers are already engaging, will make a difference to the sound of your message. He says, 'For example, researchers have found that rewording towel reuse messages from, "Reuse your towel and save planet earth," to, "Most customers that stayed in this room reused their towel," increased engagement by 30%.'

For Dr Font, it's these subtle messages that work well when trying to promote a business or product as sustainable. 'Very few people select a product or service supplier because of their sustainability

SUSTAINABLE MARKETING: GETTING STARTED

Why not try some of these tips from VisitEngland's Keep it Real toolkit.

■ **Engage with opinion leaders.**

When marketing, get others – particularly experts – to talk about your sustainable approach. It will have more impact than talking about it yourself.

■ **Keep it short and simple.**

Guests don't want to be bombarded with technical

jargon. Keep your sustainable messages brief, clear and relevant to people's everyday lives.

■ **Talk about your green credentials** in your reception, in your bedroom pack, on your website, on promotional leaflets and in advertising.

■ **Most importantly,** talk about sustainability 'at ground level'. In other words, use polite, friendly notices to explain sustainable activities

where they're happening around your premises.

■ **As well as showing** benefits to the environment, where possible explain how your sustainability efforts benefit visitors. For instance: locally sourced food tastes great.

■ **Children learn best** by doing things. A message may well pass them by; a fun sustainable activity will probably be remembered for a long time.



The number of people buying environmentally friendly products doubled from 2007-2012

‘There are so many aspects to sustainable tourism and it’s beneficial to everyone: consumers, owners, staff and wildlife’

credentials,’ he says. ‘This market is very demanding and people are not willing to make sacrifices during their holidays. However, our research suggests that most people select sustainable products for the benefits they offer them. For instance, few consumers choose a local beer or locally produced cake because they want to make a positive contribution to the economy, but a large number will believe that a more sustainable product is higher in quality.’

It’s in the detail

It’s telling that Dr Font focuses on some of the more modest and easily achievable measures, such as re-using towels. Wendy and Paul Seabrook, owners of four-star

Silver Caxton House guesthouse in Skegness, believe that it’s the smaller details that reinforce their sustainable credentials and delight their visitors.

‘We provide a jar of marmalade as a thank you gift when guests check out,’ says Wendy. ‘It’s local and has our number on as a reminder of where it came from. We have had a number of guests return jars on subsequent visits to be reused. Some have also seen our number on the jar, so thought they would call to rebook.’

Wendy and Paul have also adopted a sustainable, and very successful, approach to providing water. Formerly, they were putting 350 bottles out to recycle each month, something they had to pay for. Now they have a filtered water system and provide water in glass bottles with toppers. These can all be cleaned in the dishwasher and amount to a great saving.

Consider certification

If you’re taking steps towards a more sustainable business model, you should consider getting certified. There are processes to go through, but they help businesses prove to customers and suppliers they are following sustainability guidelines. The Green Tourism Business Scheme, validated by VisitEngland, can award a bronze, silver or gold grading level; businesses that sign up can also benefit from exclusive deals with green suppliers.

For Dr Xavier Font, businesses aiming at sustainability should definitely join a scheme. ‘Certification from a reputable scheme helps tourism businesses give independent evidence of their sustainability efforts,’ he says. He does, however, repeat the point that businesses don’t always fully understand how to properly market sustainable credentials. Again, that’s where VisitEngland’s Keep it Real toolkit can help. It has plenty of advice on marketing sustainability, from businesses of all sizes. In every case, they’ve developed a green ethos that positively appeals to customers.



Go to www.visitengland.com/green to discover more about sustainability.

‘Sustainable tourism is our USP’



Maggie Watson and Ian Ripper run Wheatland Farm, a VisitEngland award-winning self-catering business in Devon

SAYS MAGGIE, ‘FOR US IT’S about efficiency, cutting waste, and investing in better ways to do things, often locally. For the guests, it’s about wildlife on their doorstep, surprise at how “doable” green is, and knowing their holiday money is keeping Devon the wonderful place they wanted to visit. They feel good about that – and what could be better than making visitors feel good?’

‘Anyone can be sustainable, but in our experience it’s best to start pragmatically and see what you can do profitably. You could buy green power, fix rather than replace things, always buy the most efficient appliances, and see how you can work with others to keep your guests happily holidaying locally rather than driving for miles. Sustainability tends to look a bit different in rural and urban settings. But there is always something to do. And while you’re doing it, tell your guests about your efforts, even if these are small scale to start with – you’ll be surprised at the interesting conversations it kicks off.’

‘Having said that, adopting a sustainable approach – especially for bigger projects – does require some work. When we ditched our oil-fired heating, our own house was cold until we got a biomass system. The guest accommodation was warm, though! Also, in retrospect, we should have started closely monitoring things like power consumption earlier. We thought, “We know we’re trying hard to reduce consumption, so what’s the point?” But measuring provides a baseline, and when you measure something, whether electricity or waste, you start understanding your business better and ideas pop up for improvements that also help the bottom line.’