

Transcript of 'Hosting Green Events'

Season 2, Episode 22, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Jan: In today's episode, it's party time! How sustainable are your parties? How do you feel about milk kegs? Plus, Paul has got a new favourite accreditation. Here's our conversation with the Head of Business Development and Academic Events Services here at Lancaster University, Hilary Barraclough.

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Jan, I want to organise an event with you.

Jan: I think it's a very good idea. Where do you want to run the event?

Paul: I have no idea. I have no expertise in planning events, really. I, I just occasionally invite people around to my house. I don't know about you.

Jan: [laughs] I do do that as well, but I go to lots of events. And sometimes it's quite interesting, at some events you almost wince, so you see some, you know, bad sustainability practice, whereas at other events you go, ooh, that looks great. Somebody's clearly thinking about sustainability and events in the same headspace.

Paul: You sound like a right riot at parties [Jan laughs] if that's what you're going around thinking about all the time. And there I am, I'm mostly thinking, you know, everyone's having a fun time or, so what can we do to have a bit more fun? No, you are thinking about, that's not sustainable, that's not, oh that's quite sustainable, that's not sustainable. Wow...

Jan: I was, I was thinking of more of conferences and meetings than parties. I think parties you just have to roll with.

Paul: Yeah, it didn't sound like that to me. [Jan laughs] I've got a very negative impression now of the kind of party you are gonna be throwing.

Jan: Well, what, what can I say? All fun.

Paul: Shall we find out a bit more about, uh, events and general events? Not necessarily just parties and how they can be run.

Jan: That'd be great. Who, who's can tell us about that.

Paul: Well, today we're joined by Hilary Barraclough, who is the Head of Business Development and Academic Event Services here at Lancaster University. Hello, Hilary.

Hilary: Hello. Thank you very much for inviting me.

Paul: First question, Hilary, before we get onto anything.

When you're at a party, are you just going around thinking how sustainable things are?

Hilary: I do sometimes actually, 'cause I think it's something that we all do.
[laughs]

Paul: It really isn't. It really isn't. [Jan and Hilary both laughing] You can't, don't just tar me with the same brush, I'm not going around parties thinking these things. Bet it's interesting you two at a party together...

Hilary: [laughing] ...yeah...

Paul: Perfect, perfect. Uh, tell us a little bit, Hillary, about what being the Head of Business Development and Academic Events Services actually entails, what you're doing.

Hilary: Okay. So I obviously head up a team of professionals, um, that are in the events industry.

Uh, and our role is to try, uh, and engage, um, with local, international, national companies to come along to Lancaster University to hold their next conference event. That can be anything from 15 people up to 1500 people.

Um, so primarily that is my role. The academic event services I think is probably my favourite bit, 'cause that's engaging with our academics at Lancaster University. And it's about making it easy for them to bring high profile events to Lancaster University.

So it's things that, you know, as an academic that, that might be part of their research or it might be that an association might have approached them. Um,

and I'm about trying to make it easy for them, helping them with delegate registrations, helping them with bid submissions, and just generally so they can focus on what they're good at. And hopefully I focus on what we we're good at. [laughs]

Jan: So when it comes to thinking about the sustainability and business agenda and events, how do these two things mesh together?

Hilary: Okay. So it's quite a topical thing because obviously in an, not in an ideal world, but in some people's world, everything will be digital, everything will be online.

However, for me, people do need people, and I think it's so important that human interaction, especially in your early careers, uh, networking, um, people get so much more from face-to-face collaborations.

However, digital does have a place. Um, so if you are hosting a conference, it is good to do something online sometimes, because it does mean it's more accessible to all, and actually you can increase your audience.

So as somebody that has a venue that's trying to promote it to people to do online conferencing, of course I would say, you know, that is the thing. But we also are seeing a trend, um, that organisers want people to see people face to face, 'cause you do tend to make those long-term relationships. People do need people.

And there was a statistic that came out from MIA yesterday to say that with online events, um, a third of people are distracted and it's costing the economy something like 27 billion a year, which I found quite astounding.

Um, so I think people will look at this, organisers, and think there is a place, and sometimes somebody might have a face-to-face event, and then the next one they might do online.

Jan: And indeed our, our colleagues in computing will tell us that there, there is an impact from digital events as well through the...

Hilary: ...yeah...

Jan: ...the computers and all of those sorts of things. But what kind of sustainability impacts arise from an in-person event? Um, some of them of course will be in within the control of the people coming to the event, so how I travel to get to Lancaster to come to an event will be one thing. But what kind

of things are we able to do here on the ground in terms of helping the sustainability profile of an event?

Hilary: Okay. Like you say, I think the biggest thing is travel. Um, so we've got people flying in from, you know, all over the world, traveling in the UK. The team are very, very focused on promoting how good the transport links are to Lancaster. So we make that as easy as possible for people.

We've got a fantastic train service, you know, a fantastic bus service. Uh, we've introduced day delegate packages where we actually give them, um, a bus pass just to make it easy for them. So I think for us, I think our biggest impact is travel and people getting here.

Obviously, I think a lot of things within events can be monitored, reduced. So wastage, food wastage, obviously, you know, we, we, we can measure that. We can control that. If I was organising a conference, I would also ask them to think about, you know, the sustainability side of it.

So, you know, could they use an app rather than like lots of paper. So I would give them sort of little guidelines of things that are good practice, you know, having a conference app.

So there's, there's lots, lots of things. I think we've minimised the waste. I mean, obviously water, you know, now we don't provide bottled water, we've got plenty of water machines. So delegates are encouraged to bring their own, uh, vessels to put the water in.

In terms of, you know, food, it's done on crockery, there's no disposables. Any disposables that aren't used for packed lunches are all recyclable. So I think we try our best to do what we can to, to minimise, um, that, and we're very conscious.

And also in terms of food. I would always say to a conference, you know, consider other things other than if it's a, if it's a residential one, maybe have a vegetarian, have a vegan lunch to go with, you know, your meat as well.

Paul: Are there challenges that still remain, ones that you've identified, things that you feel that need to be tackled around events and making them more sustainable?

Hilary: Yeah. So I would say the most practical thing, but I think if I don't know a measure, but cling film. Because we deliver everything into outlets. So we have two central kitchens and it goes into lots and lots of different places. And

I would say that the person that comes up with a cost-effective way to replace clingfilm is going to make a fortune. [laughs]

Because for me, we use so much. When we're doing deliveries for two or 300 people, you know, we can't just take it out in cloches because we're delivering it maybe on a trolley or in a van. It has to be hygienic, you know, to, to meet food regulations. Um, so I would say that was our biggest challenge.

Jan: You certainly, you know, thinking about events that I've been at you, you take the clingfilm off the sandwiches, but you, but I guess I'd never sort of multiplied that by the number of people, number of events, and then poof, you're into a whole different ballgame.

Hilary: Yeah, we're into massive amounts. And, also what you've also got to think about is clingfilm, people over wrap. So it's actually educating the team not to over wrap as well 'cause you could end up using three times as much than you actually need.

So there's some work around that because again that, we can do that, we've got control over it, but still it's finding that, that material that will be as good and as cost effective.

There are materials out there, but for the volume that we, we do, it's...

Paul: So how much of this is educating your team then? 'Cause it sounds like you, you know, you've got changes you want to make, you've got, um, advice you want to give to delegates and stuff, but how much is it educating your team who are responsible for organising, hosting all of these events on what they can do as well to make it more sustainable from the moment everyone arrives.

Hilary: So it's part of our culture. I mean, it's one of our values as commercial services, that sustainability is the top of it. So we do training around it. We do toolbox talk. We celebrate good practice. You know, we get we, they are generally, a really good, enthusiastic team that I feel of all are, are really into the sustainability side. I think all of us are nowadays, aren't we?

And if they've got new ideas or they've seen good practice, um, then obviously, you know, we, we want to share it and we want to say at team meetings, we want to investigate if it's workable. But all the team, from my point of view, the business development team will, will be asking the same kind of questions.

We'll be pushing transport links, we'll be pushing, you know, all the different things that we can offer. Uh, we do a lot of work with, um, people that do like activity based things up at Forrest Hills, so we do like wildlife walks and one of the reasons we've got involved with that lady is because she does sustainable projects that support the community, um, so well, as well as learning something about the environment and the wildlife up at Forrest Hills, which she's, she's fantastic and the stuff that she knows is unbelievable. It's really interesting.

It also helps the community as well because it means she can do these type of things within the city to perhaps people that wouldn't have access to, to those tools.

Um, so as a team, we, we we're quite a close team and I think we've all got similar values and I think it's just about celebrating that.

Jan: And what I like about that, 'cause location does matter. And this sort of comes across on some of the other conversations we've had, particularly with, uh, the sustainability manager of, of Lancaster University, but also thinking about the energy infrastructure of, of the University. The lower carbon our estate is, the better it is for a conference as well...

Hilary: ...it's fabulous, it's fabulous. I mean, part of our platinum eco-accreditation that we got was because of what the University does in terms of its district heating. Obviously, we've got the solar farm up at Forrest that'll come online in May. We've piggybacked on good practice and from an organiser's point of view, that's fabulous.

So we've actually recently, we're just developing a product, which we hope will be in place by the end of the month, where we can actually produce a report for people. Erm, so when they make a booking we can produce this report on how sustainable their event is, or the venue that they use, to put in their statistics and come up and say, right, this is a useful thing for them to have, which most organisations now, it's really important to them.

And actually, hopefully, because we do take it so seriously, and we are so mindful, it's probably one of our, could I say one of our selling points. Not being, you know, because obviously the sustainability's really important, but it is key.

Jan: And certainly I, I've worked with professional associations in the past and, you know, um, looking forward to where the, the next conference is going to be, et cetera, and those kind of questions at the forefront of, um, say the British Academy of Management's line of sight, because they too are thinking about sustainability as a core research area and practice area.

So everyone's trying to practice what they preach in the activities they undertake.

Hilary: Definitely, and I think the little things that you do all add up to big things, and I think that's so important.

You know, as, as sort of practitioners, we're not gonna change the world, but by doing little things, and, and educating people as well, and the other thing that we offer, you know, if somebody came to do a conference, we've got loads of experts that know about this area and we can pull them in to add some value to an event, which people love that as well. Um, because if it is very high upon their agenda, it just refocuses people's minds. So, it's great.

Paul: And how high on the agenda would you say sustainability is? Have you seen it getting more and more important for all the people who are organising events over recent years?

Hilary: So, I've definitely seen it getting more important. It's quite interesting because I went to a conference in December and talking to them and asking like, you know, how agents book and what's important to them, and they actually said that sustainability isn't as important to agents is what you think. Price and venue is more important, which really surprised me.

However, for your big agents, like say for instance Calder, uh, who deal with government bookings, their clients require them to have sustainability. So, it's important to them.

So they will not use venues that don't meet that criteria. So I think it's a bit of a mixed message, but I would definitely say it's more on the increase, and it doesn't really matter what they want, 'cause we're gonna give it 'em. [laughs]

Jan: Yeah...

Paul: You will be sustainable whether you like it or not. [everyone laughs]

Jan: And this, this really is, uh, pulled into my mind and a, a big shout out to somebody who I know listens to this podcast, Adam Mitchell. He did a, a really fun thing one year.

He cycled from, I mean, he does like cycling, so that helps, he cycled from here to the ferry in Hull, took a ferry to the Netherlands and then cycled from there to the conference venue...

Hilary: ...wow...

Jan: ...and then did the return trip.

Hilary: Wow, that's brill...

Jan: So, so he was just sort of really experimenting. Could he get to the conference in a low carbon way?

And I know when he got there, people were really interested in, you know, his articulation of that journey. And that journey's not for everyone, 'cause it would take me a week to get to Hull on a bike, you know?

But, but it's actually, it's, it's people experimenting with ways of thinking about their, their carbon footprint. And how you can do things in different ways...

Hilary: It's the impact, isn't it? It's your impact as an individual. Uh, which I think that's great. Yeah.

Jan: And when we were chatting before we, we ended up on the topic of milk bottles...

Hilary: ...yes...

Jan: ...and so I know you have a great milk bottle story, which, uh, um, I'll leave to you to describe.

Hilary: Yeah, yeah. So this was something, um, that the University gets all their milk in by plastic cartons or used to. Obviously there's lots of plastic in it. We've got eight or nine bar areas, you know, we've got the whole internal catering, so they do thousands and thousands of cups of tea and coffee throughout the year. So that's a lot of plastic.

So we approached a company who, first of all we did, we did a pilot scheme in Marketplace to see, actually, did it work? What, how did it come in? What did it taste like? You know, and kind of like, maybe sent it to a couple of areas, whereas now we've gone completely plastic free in terms of milk, milk bottles.

Um, so we can deliver it in a bottle that's now washable, which is a, a glass bottle...

Jan: ...mm-hmm...

Hilary: ...so, so much better.

Jan: So what does the milk come in instead of a plastic bottle?

Hilary: It comes in like a keg. Um, so like your beer does. [laughs] Except it's non-alcoholic, and some would argue better for you. [laughs]

Paul: I don't think some, I think generally [general laughter] unless you have a lacto-intolerance issue, that milk is.

And it, it may sound like it's one thing, but it's one thing that has a big effect across the whole year, across all the events, and much like the clingfilm you were talking about before it, it builds up and builds up.

And I guess if you've got something like that happening, something like the clingfilm, if you can resolve that issue happening, all the other things. In total, it just, you can see a great big picture where there's been massive change and massive effect.

Hilary: Yeah, and it's not only that it's, it's the momentum. 'Cause obviously if we pilot something like that, then share it with other establishments, other universities, it has a cascade effect.

Which, that's the importance of sustainability. It's not a, a great secret. If you come up with a product and it's sustainable, then you should shout about it and you should share it with your colleagues. Um, because we're, we've got a common goal.

Jan: So, so one of the things that Paul loves best is, um, accreditation services and ways of...

Paul: [deadpan] ...I love it...

Jan: [laughs] ...ways of deciding if you're good. So you mentioned this, but I'm, I would like to sort of unpack the box that Lancaster University has been awarded with a Platinum EcoSmart accreditation, um, recognising eco-friendly hotels and conference venues, et cetera, et cetera.

Could you tell us about that process? 'Cause that sounds like an, you know, a significant amount of effort would go into actually achieving that, but there'll

be good purpose for it. So tell us about this accreditation. How did you get it and what maybe you learned from the process?

Hilary: Okay, so the accreditation has been around for a couple of years.

We were looking for an accreditation and we wanted something not like the, the sort of standard things that normally hotels go into, something that was more bestowed to universities.

So when it first came about. We, we filled in the application form. Now that it does take a long, lot of work, you know, it's quite a lengthy document. However, it was a team effort from the university.

So our colleagues in the states were fabulous. You know, everybody inputted in it. So it wasn't just us inputting it, um, submitted it and we got gold straight away. Um, and then what they wanted to do is, because obviously there was some establishments that were really going above and beyond that probably exceeded that gold sort of standard. So they brought in the platinum standard, so we thought, right, let's have a go for this.

Reapplied, resubmitted our application form and got platinum. So, to me it was a great honour because there was only 15 establishments within the UK that have actually got that accreditation.

There's loads of really interesting, uh, members out of the 15. So we've got people like Lambeth Palace, uh, we've got the British Medical Association, which is a iconic, fantastic building. And we were, other than Oxford Brooks, the only university to have it. Since then, Warwick's now, um, got the same accreditation.

So...

Paul: [deadpan] Curse you, Warwick...

[general laughter]

Hilary: ...which is great. But the opportunity with that is we have, as a group, we meet every three months, uh, and we share good practice and share ideas, um, share things that we might be developing, um, you know, and it, and it is again about cascading it to the other members.

So members that haven't got that platinum, you know, to going along to them and saying, look, this is what we're doing. Come and have a look. You know, or you know, I'll have a call with you or whatever.

So, yeah, so, so it's been absolutely fabulous. It's been great 'cause it's, you get to go to sort of London and see all these lovely places as well. So I, not denying that's not good. Um, but it's just been really nice 'cause it opens up different doors. Um, 'cause that's more the commercial side, um, of things.

But they do fantastic things. I mean, there's, in Lambeth Palace, there's like a tree, uh, and I think it produces plums and they, they make plum jam and it's like 15th, a 15th century tree or something, and then they sell it in the shop.

Little stories like that, and it just, I like things like that. [laughs]

Jan: Yes, that's a wonderful bit of branding, isn't it?

Paul: And I found interesting there, there was mention of a plum tree because the accreditation [inaudible] my greengage [Hilary laughs] and now I'm wondering if it's indeed a greengage plum tree...

Jan: No, no, no...

Hilary: ...no, no...[laughing]

Paul: ...in which case, it'd only be in season for about two weeks.

Jan: Oh, I love greengages...

Paul: ...I love greengages, but you can't get them.

Jan: You can get them in France, but very little.

Paul: Yeah, there's that small window, isn't there? It's small greengage window...

Jan: Anyway, what I'm going to say on the back of this. What's really interesting about what you described Hilary, is that it's an accreditation with a green business club associated with it, and that's absolutely inspirational.

'Cause if you're accredited and then nothing ever happens, but you're sort of, you've got it or you're not, you know, that's helpful. But to be accredited and then get to interact with other accredited people to refine your practice, but also to cascade your practice on, I love that design. That's really, it's innovative.

Paul: It is. That's something that really struck me as well. You're all passing on your best practice, you're passing on the ideas. You're making sure that other people are gonna be getting platinum accredited much as we might joke or

curse Warwick for becoming the third university, you want everyone else to be doing well...

Hilary: ...you do...

Paul: ...and to be up at that level.

Hilary: Yeah, you do. You want everybody to be doing the same and then we need to go to the next level.

Jan: Yeah. And I, I like Warwick, but try getting to Warwick on a bus. [Hilary laughs]. I'm just saying, just saying.

Paul: I, I've been to Warwick and I think, I think we drove, yeah.

Jan: Yeah, we have to get off at Coventry train station as well... [laughs]

Paul: ...and the less said about Coventry the better.

Jan: Oh, I steady on, I like Coventry.

Paul: It's, it's got a bad reputation though. You don't have to say you've been sent to Coventry for no reason...

Jan: I suppose so.

Paul: So Hilary, let's just wrap up then by seeing some inspiration that you've drawn from an event you've been to, that's had sustainability at its heart.

Hilary: I mean, I would say most of our, the events that I attend have that at the heart. So I've been to Keele University who did a superb sustainable conference, but everybody's got the heart. You know, it's at the heart of everything, through the food, through everything they do and all the practices.

Um, but I suppose for me, one of the ones that I've drawn the most from is we did an eco-innovation conference, uh, I think it was in 2020, maybe a little bit earlier. I got so much from that conference 'cause that was probably, it might have even, I'd actually made a note of the date, it might be even a little bit earlier. Um, I got so much from that conference because I think it was my first conference that was actually really proper, proper eco-friendly.

Um, and from that got some really good contacts that, if I had some ideas or you know, I needed some inspiration or, what can I do about this, I'd got somebody to go to. Um, so for me, I think, I think that kind of, maybe for me that was brilliant.

Um, and that I think got me onto the road of really, really thinking about it and really thinking, right, we can make a little difference and trying to get that passion into it, which I think is so, so important.

Paul: That's brilliant. Hilary, thank you very much for joining us today.

Hilary: Thank you very much.

[Theme music]

Paul: I reckon Jan, you could now hold an event a lot more sustainably, and not have to be the boring person wandering around worrying about sustainability.

Jan: [laughs] Well, that isn't that just the thing with sustainability as well, is that once it becomes a, a background, established feature of where you are, then you know you can relax on it. And that's, that's if you like the ideal.

Paul: And it's great to see that, the team here are being more sustainable, but they're not just being it, they're educating the people who are taking part in events, they're educating the people who are helping run the events so that it becomes more natural to them, like you say, so it becomes part of the routine.

Jan: Yeah, and I, I remember being at, um, oh, I was staying at a hotel at Hamburg on my way on a train from Stockholm to Lancaster, so you do have to stop somewhere off for that. And with my ticket for, you know, getting into my room, they gave me a bus day pass.

And that was a few years ago but I remember being just so excited by the fact that they offered me mobility at the same time, uh, without me having to figure out how do you get one, where does things come and go from, et cetera.

And so it was a wee bus timetable and a, and a day pass. And I, I love that aspect of what we do here as well.

Paul: Yeah, I've seen it at various places whereby if you arrive by train, they'll give you a discounted ticket. There are various theme parks, there are various other things across the continent that I've been to that, if you can show that both you are staying there, so you're not just a tourist who's in and out during the day, or that you've arrived there by train, you get discounts, you get cheaper tickets, all that kind of thing.

And so yeah, that kind of thing is a good thing.

Jan: The other thing occurred to me from how she was talking about it, is that we, well, I mean we, we are here, so hence we feel very lucky about being here, but we do have the luck of the place.

So to be able to, if you're having a conference at Forrest Hills, which for people who don't know, the layout is a, you know, a short distance from the University, and in some really nice grounds.

And, um, the sort of Green Lancaster have been planting trees there over, over many years as well. So to be able to get a, a wee wildlife tour while there seems to be really quite exciting.

But also that all the work and the effort, um, from Georgiana Allison and her team on the estate side of things, in having decent strategies and actually making that transition to, to net zero energy for the University also then feeds into this as well.

Paul: And it's the luck of the place more broadly as well, because I know you made the joke about try getting a bus to Warwick, or getting a train to Warwick.

We have got a train station that is on the West Coast Main Line that is just a few miles from the University. We have got road links so you can get buses, 'cause all the National Express and other equivalent buses that travel up and down the country stop at Lancaster University because of our location. We are a place that's reasonably straightforward to get to, certainly within the UK.

Obviously internationally, you've got the issues of flying over, but I've been from Lancaster, you talk about going from Stockholm to Lancaster on the train, I've been from Lancaster to conferences over in Belgium on the train, because you can access that West Coast Main Line, you can get out of the country reasonably straightforwardly.

Jan: It's always important to be able to get out of the country reasonably straightforwardly, in my mind.

Paul: Yes. Yeah, yeah. You know, you need to have the backup plans so that you can escape and evade the law, Jan. And I know that's a key factor for you when all factors of life.

Jan: [laughs] And then the final thing that, I was really sort of wowed by is milk and kegs. I mean, isn't that a new, a new opportunity?

Paul: It strikes me as being like more like an old kind of thing, 'cause I'm pretty sure that before bottles that will have come in big containers. Like you think about the old milk churns that you get, not milk churns big, you know, bottles, metal bottles that are really, really big...

Jan: ...ah, yeah...

Paul: ...I dunno what you call them. I'm not enough of an expert on milk and its containers to be able to say, but that strikes me as being like a similar kind of thing to, that you've got the bigger containers that you then distribute at the end, you're, you're not having to just get it in pint pots or plastic bottles. Yeah. That's really good.

Jan: And that was, I thought, a really nice tie up with our, our recent, um, mini-series on plastic packaging as well. It's actually just, you know, squeezing some of the plastic out of the process.

Paul: Indeed. Indeed. So what are we doing next?

Jan: I don't know, but you do. [laughs]

Paul: I always know and you never know. You, you just turn up and take what's given to you. Next time we're gonna be talking to Jose Alcaraz Barriga, who is from Lancaster University, but not Lancaster University as you know it.

Jan: Whereabouts is he based then?

Paul: He's based at Lancaster University Leipzig, which is in Germany. And what are we gonna be talking to him about, Jan?

Jan: Undoubtedly, education. 'Cause I know he is a really passionate and, and keen educator.

Paul: He's very keen on building sustainability into the mindsets of all of his students and getting them to think positively about it. But most of all, getting them to think about sustainability.

Jan: That'll be really great.

[Theme music]

Paul: It will. So until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]