



Recommendations for Hosting a Plastic-Free, Low Waste Event

Plastic pollution has reached a crisis point. More than 15 million metric tons of plastics enter our oceans every year, harming wildlife, degrading our environment, interfering with fisheries, and compromising the oceans' ability to act as a critical carbon sink. But it's not just ocean creatures who are impacted, recent studies have found that adult humans are consuming a credit card's worth of plastic each week and recent research has raised concerns about the potential toxicity of many of the chemicals used in plastics.

Most single-use plastic items are typically used for less than 15 minutes before being disposed of, and only a tiny fraction of them are recycled. Once in a landfill or the environment, plastic never fully biodegrades. Instead, it breaks down into tiny plastic particles that act like a sponge, absorbing other toxic chemicals. A lot of these microplastic particles end up in our waterways, where they pose a severe problem for the health of marine life and the entire food chain through ingestion by wildlife. If we do not change course now, experts predict that the oceans will contain more plastic than fish by 2050.¹

Unfortunately, the plastic waste generated at events - from things such as cups, utensils, plates, water bottles - is a major source of unnecessary single-use plastic pollution. One study showed that a single event attendee discards 4.17 lbs of waste per day. For a one-thousand-person, three-day conference, that translates into 7,672 lbs of landfill material. (Or the equivalent of the weight of 2.6 compact cars).²

Avoiding single-use plastic at events has many benefits. It can divert significant amounts of waste from landfills and incinerators, decrease pressure on municipal recycling systems, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and decrease the demand for new single-use plastic items.

By opting for reusables and refillables over single-use plastics, we hope to model sustainable behavior and show others how easy and pleasant it is to have an impact.

¹ World Economic Forum, Ellen MacArthur Foundation and McKinsey & Company. "The New Plastics Economy — Rethinking the future of plastics." 2016.

² Meet Green. "The Environmental Footprint of An Event". 2014. <https://meetgreen.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/eventfoot.pdf>

Here are some specific instructions about the kind of single-use items we want to avoid at our events and the reusable alternatives we would like to use, instead:

Avoid These Items	Replace With These Items
Disposable plastic water bottles or drink bottles	Pitchers of water on tables and water refill stations
Paper napkins	Cloth napkins, if possible. If not, paper should be 100% post-consumer recycled
Disposable plates, bowls, and cutlery	Washable plates, bowls, and cutlery made of ceramic, glass, metal, or wood
Disposable hot cups	Ceramic mugs
Disposable drink cups	Glasses
Plastic straws, stirrers, lids, and spill plugs	These are often unnecessary. In lieu of stirrers, put out metal spoons
Single-serve sugar and sweetener packets	Sugar cubes or shaker bottles
Single-serve creamers	Carafes of milk, cream, and milk alternatives
Individual tea packets, especially "sachet" style single-use tea bags made of PLA or nylon (see https://www.beyondplastics.org/fact-sheets/microplastics-in-tea for more info)	Bulk loose leaf tea served in a carafe like coffee
Single-serve foil or plastic-wrapped butter	Pats of butter on a plate
Single-serve sachets or tiny plastic tubs for condiments such as ketchup, mustard, dressing, sauce, etc.	Bulk condiment dispensers and/or large reusable containers
Takeaway containers	Aluminum foil or wax paper wrap
Individually plastic-wrapped candy/mints/chocolates	Bulk treats presented on plates or in a bowl with a spoon
Plastic-wrapped toothpicks	Toothpicks that don't come individually wrapped
Plastic tablecloths	Washable fabric tablecloths

Single-use centerpieces	Reusable, plastic-free centerpieces
Balloons, glitter, and plastic confetti	Plants and flowers, paper, and reusable decorations (e.g. colorful streamers, paper lanterns, solar lights/fairy lights, flags and banners)
Plastic cling wrap	Beeswax wrap or aluminum foil
Plastic bags	Wax paper, paper, or reusable cotton bags
Lanyards with plastic clips	Lanyards made of natural fibers with metal clips. Collect them for reuse
Plastic covers for name badges	Cardboard name tags with no plastic covers
Notebooks, pens, folders, printed event abstracts	Wooden pencils, double sided materials on recycled paper or all electronic

For waste management: Compost, recycling, and waste bins should be grouped together in “stations” with clear signage about what goes in each receptacle.

Note: Compostable foodware is *not* a good option (see <https://www.beyondplastics.org/fact-sheets/bad-news-about-bioplastics> for more details). If it’s not possible to use a reusable item, a compostable alternative is only acceptable if the event venue is already contracting with a local, commercial composting facility that actually composts the material. No greenwashing.