



The 2009 San Francisco Green Festival A Path To Sustainability

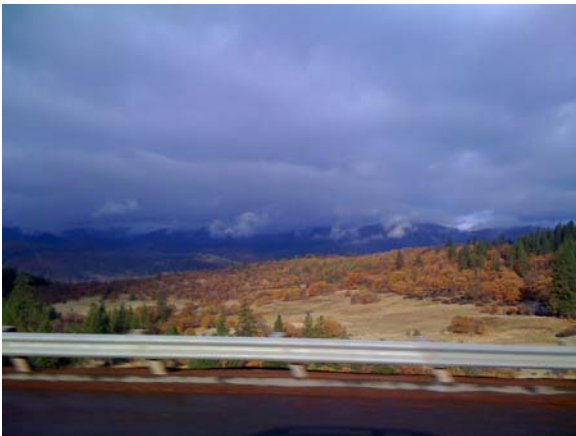
by David Anderson, Canvas Dreams, LLC

20 November 2009

This past weekend, along with Ken Hiatt of Peraska, two Canvas Dreams staffers (David Anderson, Principal and Shelly Buschel, Sales Manager) drove to San Francisco for the 2009 Green Festival. Billed as the largest venue for Green Festivals, which are held several times each year, we were filled with anticipation as we readied ourselves for the ten-hour trek from Portland, Oregon.

Day One: The drive down and the first evening in San Francisco

It's never easy starting a road trip in the middle of the night, and as I left my house to pick up the other two, the dashboard clock in the Forester reading 2:56am didn't really help my state of mind. We were en route and out of Portland before 4am, with very smooth sailing until we reached southern Oregon and were hit by a deluge of bad weather and diesel truck spray. We were into California a short while after 9am and were greeted by fog, which gave way to sun and 65F temperatures.



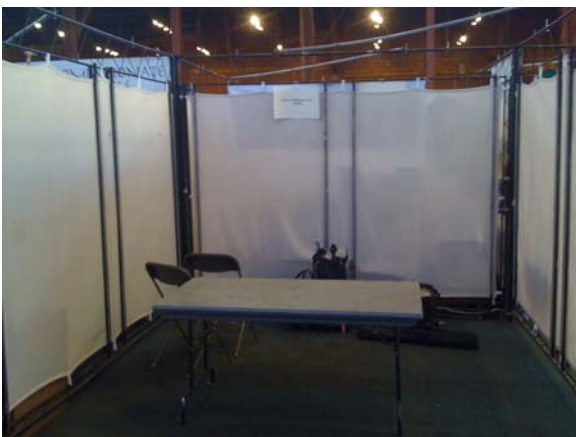
During the drive down, various conversations ensued. This was the first time Ken, Shelly, and I had spent any serious amount of time in close proximity, and the hours-long chat was one I wish I could have recorded. We talked about sustainability, philosophy, corporate responsibility, environmentalism, and much more - and it was clear the three of us hold dear many things in common.

As the day waned on and miles ticked up, we noted examples of sustainability in action (and many more examples of it not being practiced). The single biggest realization came as we entered the Bay Area and found ourselves stuck in a 45-minute backup for thousands of cars waiting to pay the toll to cross the Oakland Bay Bridge. Nearly an entire hour was spent sitting there, moving ahead several feet at a time, never long enough to turn the car off -- so we sat there and idled, along with thousands of other drivers. For a geographic region of the U.S. that has tried to carve out a name for itself as a leader

in environmental legislation and activism, we couldn't help but laugh at the irony of how wasteful it could be to simply cross the water. "Of course they are trying to become more sustainable", I commented, "just look at this - they have no choice". It was at this point I realized just how dire the situation had become in the Bay Area. Over the years, I have traveled to the area for various reasons, but never had I ever seen the roads so packed with vehicles, and then, occupied only by the driver.



Our first destination was the Concourse Exhibition Center, a former train station that had been converted into a fantastic venue for the Green Festival. We needed to set up as much as we could and thanks to the delay crossing the Bay, we had a narrowing window in which to do it all. Despite the many strict rules handed out to all exhibitors regarding union rules and what we were or were not permitted to do ourselves, the exhibit center was extremely busy, and we found the union workers to be cheerful and polite. We simply walked in our booth equipment and were set up in less than 15 minutes. We wandered about the hall for a few minutes, noting the other exhibitors already set up, as well as those who hadn't yet arrived.



Our next stop was Hotel Whitcomb, an historic hotel along Market Street and the official headquarters of the Green Business Conference and Green America staff, where we would be staying during the Green Festival. It had been beautifully renovated to its original state, with gorgeous hardwood detail, lots of ornate chandeliers and stained-glass ceiling light insets, and so forth. It really set an ambiance rooted in history and reflection on how and why this planet has come to the point it is currently at. The present situation is a result of thousands of years of decisions by our species and yet, even one hundred years ago, when the hotel was built, how very different were the views on environmentalism, and how

far (in a good sense) we have finally come since that time.

The two-day Green Business Conference was winding down as we arrived at the hotel, and we had been personally invited to attend the evening dinner and awards ceremony on Thursday night in the banquet hall. During the dinner we were surprised to learn that Vital Hemptations, one of our clients, had been nominated for the Green Business Service award, along with Dharma Merchant Services, with whom we had just begun forging a strategic partnership. In the end, Jeff Marcous at Dharma Merchant Services won the award. We introduced ourselves and congratulated them both afterwards. These were but two of the countless connections we made during the Green Festival.

Day Two: The start of Green Festival

The next morning, we finished setting up moments before the doors opened at Noon. Our booth was towards the back of the convention space, so it took a little time before foot traffic worked its way down the aisles to our end. Thankfully, the primary stage and presentation room were right across from our booth, so we weren't worried so much about our location, and with good reason. In the first two hours of Friday's show, more people walked past our booth and stopped to ask questions than the three previous trade shows we had attended this year, combined. And that was just the first two hours.

The picture on right is of Desiree Wolford, left, Penny at Taraluna, middle, and Kathy Garten, right.



And that is how it continued for all three days. Visitors kept coming by, many stopping about ten feet out from the booth, some walking right up and looking at the bamboo pens we were giving away, others wandering past only to come back a few minutes later. The majority of people who approached us all took a business card or two, a bamboo pen, and with a single exception (the first person who stopped at our booth, nonetheless) all expressed support and even admiration for our business model. To say we were stunned by the accepting welcome would not do justice to how greatly accepted we felt - and as a result, flourished - at the San Francisco Green Festival.

Two hours into Friday morning, a quiet young man approached us, pen and pad in hand. Shelly stepped out of the booth and spoke with him for quite a long time. As the man left, Shelly commented, "He's with the New York Times". We looked at each other for a few moments. I recall commenting, "Imagine if they wrote up something... it would be fantastic..." Shelly nodded.

Later in the day, Jaymi Heimbuch of TreeHugger.com approached us and asked a lengthy and extremely detailed set of questions about our services. Though most booth visitors weren't overly analytical, Jaymi was, and I respected her immensely for it. For too long, greenwashing hosts have practically gotten away with murder, with none the wiser to stop it. With more journalists like Jaymi interviewing companies like us, I started to have a feeling that it could all turn around someday very soon.

On our way out, Shelly even stopped by the say hello to the Air America Radio booth where they were live broadcasting. He never misses an opportunity to make a connection!



That evening, Ken, Shelly and I returned to the hotel room and started sharing our experiences. We were very surprised to find many of the same questions being asked. Ken noted how few people there seemed to understand concepts of sustainability, and we agreed it simply meant that greater education was needed - and it would be up to companies like ours, and including us - to directly work to see that those in need of knowledge, receive it.

Later on, while running a precursory review of traffic logs on canvasdreams.com, I was startled to see what looked like click-throughs coming from an administrative preview screen at NYTimes.com! After dinner I ran more reports and realized what the clicks had been about - we had just been published in the New York Times' Bay Area blog, an article written by the same man who had stopped by our booth earlier that morning!

The Bay Area

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November 13, 2009, 8:39 PM

The San Francisco Green Festival: Windy Web Hosting and Fizzy Chai

By ARMAND ENAMDJOMEH



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Day Three: More Green Festival

Saturday morning, we arrived at the concourse and were impressed by the line of people forming at the entrance. Exhibitor badges in hand, we walked past them and were about to go indoors, when Desiree Wolford (Green America's Business Membership Coordinator) said hello. Shelly jokingly asked if Desiree read the New York Times, and quickly told her why he'd asked. A somewhat surprised look from her said what we'd been feeling for the past 12 hours - WE'RE IN THE NEW YORK TIMES!

The pace quickened on this day. Thousands of people wandered past our booth. Few were the times when any of us could sit down, even for a minute, to take a deep breath and refocus. It was an awesome site. I'd never imagined a Green Festival could have a turnout as great as this. No matter the official attendance count, it was clear there were more people than to whom we could give our attention.



As the day waned on, I recalled that Laura Flanders - whose Web site we were recently selected to host - would be speaking at 1pm in the presentation room just opposite our booth. Having listened to her on Air America Radio many times, I wanted to get a chance to meet and thank her for all her work supporting progressive causes. About this same time, someone walked up to the booth and said they knew Laura personally, and had we realized she had just walked past?

I took off in the direction they pointed and caught up to her at one of the entrances to the presentation room. I quietly introduced myself and explained the hosting connection, and thanked her for her work.

"So you do hosting? Okay, great -- can you give me some tech support?" she asked. It couldn't have been better timing. Apparently, she needed help getting the DVD projector to work for her presentation. I explained I probably didn't know, but I could find someone who did know, and I did just that. Laura thanked me and said to stop by the book signing table after her presentation.

At 2pm, we did just that - and got our pictures taken with the one and only Laura Flanders! We also talked for a while. She had a few questions about podcasting and other hosting items, and I was thrilled to oblige. It's not every day that someone you admire and respect a great deal asks you for your expertise. :)

The pictures below are of Laura and I, left, and Laura and Shelly, right.



Shortly after this, we were approached by a "competing" Web hosting company that announced on their Web site they would be "out in force" at Green Festival and said they had "been sent to check us out". It seemed fairly evident they felt threatened by us. We engaged in polite conversation for about ten minutes before we had to excuse ourselves and get back to our booth. From our chat they seemed to be wandering around and presenting themselves as vendors to other exhibitors -- including several of our clients who we host and who were also vendors at Green Festival. No matter their intention, they didn't have a booth at the event, which would have been the respectable thing to do by all of the vendors who paid to attend in such a capacity.

Saturday evening was spent reflecting on the day's events, and how the day's booth visitors' were so similar to those on Friday - all of them asking the same or very similar questions, all leaving by saying "thanks" and with a smile on their face. We marveled at the day's event and were still stunned at the experiences we'd had thus far.

Day Four: The last day of Green Festival

As with the day before, Sunday flew right past us. Even larger turnouts than Saturday were evident as we approached the exhibit hall, only to discover a line of people stretched down the street and around the block! No sooner had we turned on the monitor when waves of people began rush past. We were kept on our feet and busier than ever for most the day. In the afternoon hours it did wane off a bit, and we took advantage of the slower pace by inviting passers-by to go behind our table and sit down for a few minutes. We did this with several of Shelly's leads and contacts (he used to live here 20 years ago) and it simply added to the friendly atmosphere.

Below, Ken Hiatt, right, speaks with a booth visitor.



In the afternoon, each of us took turns wandering the exhibit hall by ourself. I was startled to realize it was the first time I'd done it all weekend, and I spent just ten minutes doing it (this was in stark contrast to previous trade shows where we had so much time, we spent hours away from the booth so we could simply talk with someone else - other vendors).

6pm rolled around faster than we'd thought it would. Immediately, police officials at the exits announced that the hall was now closed except to the vendors. I chuckled to think how many other "peaceful gatherings" in the area had been similarly ended in the same manner (except this time there were no arrests)!

I rushed back to the hotel to get the Forester. Unlike the harried setup process, vendors were able to park right up against the building, sometimes several vehicles deep, and load up without any hassle from union reps or security/police. Overall, the take-down process went very smoothly and orderly. Everyone in the hall was focused but also relaxed.

Once we returned to the hotel room, I literally fell forward onto my bed in exhaustion. We agreed to get take-out or delivery and have dinner in the hotel room. It turned into one of the best ideas of the entire weekend, because we were able to calmly talk about our experiences and without the noise of a busy restaurant.

Later that evening, Ken and I had planned to meet with the Green America team. We sat and talked with Desiree about a number of topics. Most importantly, we had a chance to relay our experiences at Green Festival, our impression of the crowd and other vendors, and how everyone could benefit from a better understanding of sustainability. It was the nice end to an extremely busy but successful event.

Day Five: The Drive Home

The previous days' writings mostly covered the quantitative aspect of our experiences at Green Festival. In contrast, the 11-hour journey back to Portland gave the three of us ample time to digest what we'd experienced, and even manage to put some order to it. The following is a qualitative account of what we felt and shared with each other on the drive back home during a very long and creative conversation.

Early on at the festival, we discovered that no matter the service being offered, what mattered most to

booth visitors was: is it sustainable?

Though most visitors asked us this question, my impression is that not everyone understood exactly what it was they were asking. After reading our tag line, "Sustainable Web Hosting", many would smile and ask, "So, what *is* sustainable Web hosting?"

It was a perfect situation, because answering such a question can't be done in under 60 seconds, and that's just long enough to get a conversation going with the person once you've given them the answer. Though we already understood it well, we really got to appreciate the value of communication like this, because every person we engaged with in this manner took a card and a pen, smiled and thanked us, and said they would tell (fill in the blank) about us.

Some visitors didn't care to go that far and just asked "Are you green?". If you want to know, the answer is, "We're not green, we're greener. We're on a path to sustainability". That would either lead to the previous scenario, or the person would politely wander off.

The single, best question came from one person, who after looking at our stand up displays, the video monitor, even our business cards, finally asked, "Do you sell awnings?" I still laugh out loud when I think about that one.

Out of all of this, we came to understand that every visitor was genuinely concerned about the impact of their decisions and wanted to speak directly with exhibiting companies about this concern. Some visitors were better able to articulate their thoughts more so than others, but every single person who stopped to chat helped us understand the things they hold dear; they reached out and took our extended hand, and we started a conversation with them.

For me, it was a reminder that in an age of instant communication and data overload, potential customers crave a connection with the company to whom they will be doing business. They don't want promises, they want to know someone is alive on the other end of the deal. People at Green Festival were looking for the real deal. They craved something real and tangible, something they could grasp and hold and embrace, and with the power of a simple conversation, they were able to connect with us.

Like some conversations that one revisits, so too did many visitors drop by on subsequent days, some with additional questions, others taking more business cards, and others still walking into the booth and sitting down for a direct chat with one of us. If we'd opened up the space more and put in some stuffy chairs, I could see this sort of thing happening all day long. The conversations we carried with all of the visitors varied widely, but it all centered around concepts of sustainability, responsibility, and vision. Through communicating that sustainability is an iterative process, that we're not yet perfect but working to become a better business each and every day, I feel we were able to share a very personal and human side of our company.

Even my random meeting with Laura Flanders was a perfect example of "human business" in action through simple communication. A simple request by her for technical assistance spurred a conversation and has laid the foundation for many interesting exchanges to come. Every interaction by a company's representative is a potential connection that may foster a relationship. No matter how great or small the event, it all adds up to building a voice for the business, which after you've said goodbye to the person you were chatting with, will remain in their mind as an echo and voice they will want to remember.

So it dawned on me on the drive home that over the course of Green Festival, Canvas Dreams, as a

reflection of its human team members had finally found its voice in the crowd. For too long had we focused on what we do and not enough on how we do it. The name Canvas Dreams has always been about finding creative inspiration -- like a blank canvas you paint with your dreams, as the name suggests -- and as the business evolved into a technology company many years ago, we had struggled to express our vision. But that was then, and a lot has changed in the years since then, and after this weekend, I can appreciate by just how much.

And, the fact so many visitors stopped by our booth two days in a row was a powerful indicator that visitors wanted to reconnect with us and that our name had stuck in their mind. Indeed, during our drive back home, a query came in to the CABN list about domain hosting. I'd sent off a brief note to the original poster offering assistance, which was quickly followed by half a dozen or more unsolicited comments from other CABN members recommending us! Beyond the huge amount of appreciation we felt for such a kind act by so many of our colleagues, it told me that sustainable business is about relationships that support you during even the oddest of times, like while driving 75mph down the interstate!

Here is how it all breaks down. Our business is on the path to sustainability, and we now have the metrics to prove it, thanks to the great work by Ken Hiatt at Peraska, and the ability to gauge our continued progress over the coming months and years. The response from Green Festival was so overwhelmingly positive we don't just think, we know it for a fact that the approach we are taking is working. The approach of reaching out, human to human and having a conversation has now given our company a voice that truly reflects our core values and philosophies.

Following Green Festival, here is how I have internalized the notion of "sustainable business": Beginning a conversation and forging a relationship gives you the ability to continue the conversation into the future, and is a major component of sustainable business. To that end, sustainability isn't about growing a business endlessly, it is listening to the business and customers to determine if growth is right, or if change is needed with respect to direction or service lines offered. Drawing on the relationships you have built with your customers, you'll never find a better source for feedback and suggestions. If you design your business around principles of sustainability, you will find that it can both guide and enable your business to operate responsibly and efficiently, grow when and if it is the right time to do so, and bend and flex to the changing market environment so that it may be sustained.

Sustainability is a methodology every business can employ. It doesn't take a lot of time, but it does require a business think of and treat its customers like real people who have an opinion and matter. The relationships we made at Green Festival are so much more than the conversation that began them. They have created strong connections with people we respect and care about, connections that will both withstand troubled times and show us the way forward in the future during times of opportunity. As we forge ahead, we will continue sharing our experiences and thoughts with fellow businesses to demonstrate the benefits of sustainable business, help them realize why it is so important to us, and how they too can become involved with this way of doing business.

Sincerely,

David Anderson
Principal, Canvas Dreams, LLC