



Sustainability in the event industry is not a completely unknown topic; on the contrary, it has been developing into a competitive factor for some time now. In order to systematically address the existing efforts, ISO 20121 is a proven tool for major events. In the field of event agencies, the Berlin-based company "mediapool Veranstaltungsgesellschaft mbH" is a pioneer in the certification of sustainable event management. Mediapool shared with us their first experiences of introducing and implementing ISO 20121 in an interview.

The interview took place on 04/22/2021 via ZOOM.

Sustainable events with system - mediapool shows how it works

mediapool (mp) is an agency, which holistically and sustainably develops stagings, events, exhibitions into custom-fit individual events and campaigns. The planning know-how mp could prove in the meantime in nearly 30 years in nearly all kinds of meetings from a hand.

GUTcert (GC) is a certification body for management systems focusing on quality, environmental, energy and occupational health and safety management. It verifies greenhouse gas emissions according to recognized standards and certifies sustainability requirements for biomass according to ISCC/REDcert and the RSPO Supply Chain (SCC). Building on many years of experience in these areas, it offers an assessment of companies' sustainability performance using the GUTcert Sustainability Check. As a member of the AFNOR Group network, GUTcert is active internationally.

GC: mp is one of the pioneers in the industry. You are the first in Germany to receive the ISO 20121 Sustainable Event Management certificate. How has your path to sustainability shaped up?

mp: Protecting our environment has always been part of our DNA. Over the last 30 years, we have purposefully accumulated a wealth of know-how when it comes to organizing our events in an environmentally friendly way. For example, we were one of the first organizations to set as a goal many years ago to procure green power for energy supply in the temporary sector, which was difficult to achieve for a long time. We have also been active in discussing industry developments in the associations, making our experiences available to all and working together to define the path of sustainability for the industry.

The more we looked at sustainability, the more clearly we could see that we needed some standardization of our workflows. We have also grown a lot as a company in recent years and this required an internal system that clearly defines all business processes so that all our sustainability innovations can be applied equally by all teams despite the diversity of our event types.

We also realized that focusing solely on environmental protection was no longer enough. The social impact of events on society, such as accessibility, accessibility or inclusion, anti-discrimination, compliance with labor law throughout the value chain, and the concerns of our own team should be addressed more strongly and, above all, consistently. Here, too, we looked



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for examples around the world of how specific sustainability issues can also be implemented at major events, for example at the Sidney Festival in 2010 or the Olympic Games in London in 2012 and at the European Song Contest in Vienna in 2015. We did a lot of research and contacted other market players, for example the German Council for Sustainable Development on the topic of inclusion at events or the Berlin-based association *Kunststoffe e. V.* which collects material waste such as carpets, wood, and plastic after events and then ensures the greatest possible recycling.

We have also been strongly influenced by the development of public sector tendering procedures. Since 2019, proof of sustainability performance in the design and implementation of events has become a fixed component there. For us, this meant nothing other than that we needed meaningful proof of all our efforts in order to secure contracts and make the tendering process more efficient by minimizing demand loops. In 2019, DIN named two standards for our industry in its guide for public sector tenders: the EMAS environmental management system and ISO 20121 for sustainable event management. After research, discussions and talks with experts, we decided on ISO 20121 because it is precisely applicable to our business.

GC: What arguments were decisive for you in deciding in favor of ISO 20121 and against EMAS or ISO 14001?

mp: Sustainability is known to be based on three pillars: Economic efficiency, environmental protection and social responsibility. For us, this means that every decision must be considered three-dimensionally in order to achieve the best possible sustainable solution. ISO 20121 addresses all three pillars of sustainability and was created for our industry.

In our opinion, EMAS as an environmental management system does not cover everything that needs to be improved in the industry. Social responsibility towards one's own employees, society and in the entire value chain are no less important in the event industry than resource conservation and efficiency. And that's what it's all about!

It was also important to us that the ISO standard is applicable to the variety of event types and sizes in our portfolio and that the testing process is designed to be industry-specific. The time required for certification is calculated precisely according to the size and type of events, so that all certification formalities are complied with and at the same time the calculation is very individual. Here, too, the argument of the three-dimensional view fits.

GC: You have already introduced the sustainability management system for fall 2020. Difficult times for the event industry. What was the most challenging thing for you during the introduction phase?

mp: It was a real challenge to reconcile the uniform management system with the individualism of the project leaders (PL). We have always collected superpowers at mp 😊. Previously, all PLs had built their own system - and it worked. Now we have a sustainable management system for all. Such a changeover can't work smoothly right away. That's why we "docked" new documents, processes, work steps onto the existing structures and built on them: What have we always done, what has proven useful for individual PLs, what was best practice in documentation, etc.? All of this has been incorporated.



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Of course, the pandemic made things even more difficult. For all of us, work is an anchor in our lives. When this constant began to shake due to the pandemic and change management was added to the mix, the introduction of the system was initially perceived by the team as an additional burden. Most of us worked from our home offices, which made communication difficult at times: You couldn't go from table to table and talk and discuss everything with each other. We met online, held training sessions, initiated experience exchanges after projects were completed to promote understanding and acceptance. A real challenge! We all experienced some "aha-effects" during that time! And in the meantime, we have all come through this phase well!

GC: What benefits were you able to communicate to the college, or what is the experience of the project leaders themselves with the ISO system?

mp: We also designed and executed many digital and hybrid events during the pandemic. And with the first projects, our PLs also saw that the management documentation they now have to apply to every project is not, as it was initially perceived, just another annoying tool, but a tool that can be used to facilitate and achieve many things:

Planning reliability:

- ▶ No relevant aspects of sustainability are forgotten and are incorporated into the planning process in good time. Our checklists for this are worth their weight in gold!

Efficiency:

- ▶ The knowledge and experience gained from the events are recorded and can be applied to similar formats several months later. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel each time and always plan events from scratch. If the fields of action, risks and opportunities are known for the same formats, this experience should be used for the next events. In this way, the planning, the composition of the team and also the budget can be set up differently - more efficiently! - and thus some coordination loops in the planning can be avoided. Our PLs are making this experience right now, it "clicks" and brings acceptance.
- ▶ If an ISO certificate is available as proof of the company's sustainable orientation, inquiries in the context of ongoing tenders are usually significantly lower. This saves time and energy. Another point for acceptance!

Progress:

- ▶ By setting goals and monitoring results at each event, we as a company can see and show our progress. When sustainability aspects are in focus and measured, you can see the result better. Economically, too, we can now clearly argue to the skeptics that (demonstrably) sustainably organized events are profitable despite all prejudices.

Ensuring economic efficiency:

- ▶ What we are all observing is a political and social change. Sustainability in procurement is increasingly favored by the public sector in Germany, but also internationally. And now it is not about individual topics such as waste management or inclusion (as was more the case in the past), but rather a systematic approach in dealing with **all relevant sustainability issues**. With an international certificate according to ISO 20121 "Sustainable Event



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Management", we are on the right track! This is how the management sees it, but in the meantime also the whole team.

In a nutshell: Implementing a management system involves a lot of work in the beginning, but also saves time and money in the long run afterwards.

GC: During the pandemic, events ran either exclusively digital or in hybrid format. We as certifiers are often asked if this format is certifiable. You have organized some hybrid events sustainably and had them audited. What does sustainability mean in this case?

mp: Due to the pandemic, we as an event agency were forced to quickly find new solutions in order to remain profitable in the new framework conditions and to be able to retain our employees. We had to combine a familiar practice like TV streaming with the interactivity of the hybrid format. The existing management system provides us with a good tool to work out sustainability aspects in any kind of event and include them in the goal setting and setups. Here it was no different.

The reality is that even hybrid events with small numbers of participants and the crew on site still need all the other conventional services in addition to hygiene concepts, such as material and technical equipment, catering, waste disposal, logistics, fire protection, etc. This type of relevant activity is organized on a smaller scale but still sustainable. Here, too, we worked very intensively with the business partners to find the best possible sustainable solutions.

The special features of the hybrid format include increased requirements for data protection, information security and server structure. And, of course, a stable Internet connection and the determination of power consumption for streaming in order to be able to initiate CO₂ compensation of consumption if necessary. While the issue of stable connections is largely well solved, the transparency of server structures unfortunately often remains a gray area. We hope that with the further spread of hybrid events, better solutions will also be offered here in the near future.

From an economic point of view, innovations in the concept are also necessary. In face-to-face events, there are breaks, also as an emergency solution if something has to be changed or adapted. What do you do in the digital format? An unplanned break is out of the question: You need a sustainable Plan B. This can be, for example, a second small studio, which can be spontaneously switched on if something happens, in order to be able to fill the break (planned or above all unplanned). But again, there should be no duplication of equipment or large additional resources. Everything must be organized so smartly that it's more about the camera setting, with the same rooms and the existing technology: sustainability has priority. And sustainability also includes economic efficiency.

GC: One of the main concerns of ISO 20121 is to improve sustainability performance along the entire value chain of events. There is currently more and more talk in Europe about sustainable supplier management. How do you organize your work with business partners?

mp: In line with the ISO 20121 requirement, we have also introduced supplier management. First, all our business partners receive our General Terms and Conditions of Purchase (GTC). These include, among other things, a mandatory inquiry regarding relevant sustainability requirements per field of activity for the respective trades. We have defined various categories



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in the AEBs, i.e. event location, catering, hotel, services and supplies in general - on their own or as possible combinations.

In a second step, the business partners provide a self-disclosure. Before the subsequent evaluation, we contact them and discuss the results of the inquiry in order to clear up any possible misunderstandings. The questions are also weighted differently: Some requirements are a MUST (e.g. privacy policy), while others bring more of a BONUS. Should it come to the project, our responsible persons check the promised services directly on site and enter the final evaluation into our merchandise management system. This results in a traffic light system according to the results:

- ▶ **Green:** the service provider is sustainably oriented
- ▶ **Yellow:** There is still a need for clarification and consultation
- ▶ **Red:** the service provider has not accepted the AEG or cannot comply with our requirements

With a filter function, our employees can quickly search for the respective trades for each project and align the planning. The assessment is updated annually.

However, our hands are often tied when it comes to selecting trades - for example, if a venue or the client has fixed contracts with the companies providing the services. Take in-house catering, for example: Even if already on board, we go through the food and beverage offerings in great detail together with the people in charge and discuss which solutions come into question as most sustainable for the event and for this budget - and above all, what would be a knockout for the image of the event as a whole and, if applicable, also a big risk for the catering company itself. We want to work together "cool." And we want to act sustainably together. That is not a contradiction.

GC: What is your experience with your business partners? What is the feedback on your AEG and the sustainability rating?

mp: Many partners have already gone down this path themselves and can answer questions quickly and confidently. Others need some support and are happy to make use of our consulting services. It's all about understanding and knowing what sustainability means for their own activities and which solutions are already established on the market.

In addition, it is also a question of meeting the tender requirements - today and in the future. It is therefore an economic necessity to deal with the topic, less a question of "desire".

All in all, we are rarely met with rejection when it comes to collaborating on the topic of sustainability at events.

GC: What will you recommend to other companies in your industry? How should your competitors approach the topic?

mp: Step by step but with the big goal in mind!

At first, we also thought that we would only have one event certified and that we would not be able to set up a management system. Then, in the pre-audit, you as the certifier looked at our work processes and documentation and encouraged us: A lot of things were already being done



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GUTcert Interview



without being consciously declared or classified as part of sustainability management. So it was more about documenting some rules and defining the work steps to standardize the sustainable processes for all MA. All this then also created transparency and clarity for us in the processes and accordingly in the daily routine.

Therefore, dear event organizers: Start with it. Courageously, with a view to the future, because it is also about your profitability. Sooner or later, for whatever reason, sustainability will be addressed across the board in the event industry.



The interview was conducted via video conference on April 22, 2021

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