

Sustainable solutions: Q&A with Onno Poortier, itmustbeNOW



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Onno Poortier

Onno Poortier, chairman and CEO of [itmustbeNOW](#), spoke to BHN about how the hospitality industry is responding to the changing attitudes around sustainability, and the obstacles that are still to overcome.

I understand NOW has a purpose to "fundamentally change attitudes and behaviours within the hospitality industry" - how do you intend to achieve this?

"NOW launched on EarthDay 2017 with the travellers as our priority, until today. NOW is growing a global community of like-minded people who believe that travellers and the industry must be a force for good. We provide bold information so they can be inspired to travel consciously, and tools so they can use the power of their wallet to drive change as they travel".

"NOW launched the [NOW Force for Good Alliance](#) in 2018 to galvanise the hospitality industry by establishing an affiliation of extraordinary and caring places to stay. These places provide a sustainable travel experience and take responsibility for its impact on the community and the environment".

"NOW has raised the bar on accountability and transparency around sustainability, with no greenwash allowed:

- For accountability, we provide hotels with the most rigorous accredited sustainability programme with certifications - EarthCheck Evaluate with Earth Rating certification - which NOW provide free of charge in the first year of partnership with our strategic partner EarthCheck.
- For transparency, we provide the NOW Sustainability tool which connect travellers and responsible places of accommodation that care about our common future and their impact on people and planet. It finds, tracks and directly books responsible hotels, resorts and retreats you can trust. These places to stay are at different levels in their sustainability journey, ranging from those that have just started out on sustainability programmes to those that have been committed for decades. All of them are stepping up, showing progress, stopping the greenwash and being 'the best' they can be right now for our world.
- NOW entrusts hotels with the NOW Sustainability Trust Icon to recognise a brand's integrity, commitment to sustainability, and a low-carbon inclusive way of doing business. They are beacons of businesses with purpose, led by brave and conscious operators and owners who believe 'it is the right thing to do' to be part of the solution. This is placed in the communication material of hotels for all their stakeholders - as a training tool for employees, as a sales tool for the hotel team, as a resource tool for media and travel operators, and as a sustainability report for owners and investors.
- Carbon reduction and mitigation is crucial to deliver on the carbon neutral goals before 2030. NOW Offset Carbon tool is powered by South Pole, and calculates and offsets air travel carbon footprints. It's important for travellers to know where their money goes. Carbon offsetting is not the solution - it simply buys us time".

Sustainability has become a buzzword of 2019, and a trend that will undoubtedly continue in the new year. As brands start to demand tools to help guide their journey towards sustainable commitments, what is available at the moment?

"Sustainability is NOT a buzzword and it is NOT a trend. Sustainability is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. At this most urgent of times, which is projected to get worse as global temperature rise, sustainability must be a life-time commitment".

"There is a Crisis of Trust in our world since 2016 and brands are largely failing the trust test (Edelman Trust Barometer). The best tools are therefore provided to members of the NOW Force for Good Alliance. It must be rigorous, accountable and transparent around sustainability to rebuild the trust. Sustainability programmes must be accredited and measurable with independent audits".

"There is only one programme that provides a rigorous sustainability framework to support hotels and has been GSTC (Global Sustainable Tourism Council) Accredited for several years - EarthCheck - and it is preferred by four and five star hotels worldwide that are serious about sustainability. EarthCheck is now going the extra step required to complete an ASI (Assurance Service International) audit. Many others that provide sustainability certifications to hotels are still at the starting level called GSTC Recognised and have not developed the rigour in their systems to reach the accredited level after many years. There is still a demand for cheaper and easier sustainability programmes that gives a sustainability stamp without the rigour, accountability and transparency".

The implementation of green and eco-friendly initiatives are taking wave with large hotel chains. What challenges do independent hoteliers face, and how can they overcome these?

"The word sustainability, which has a focus on profit, people and the planet model, is a more effective term than "green and eco-friendly" which are now dated".

"The very large hotel chains have their own sustainability programmes, so make sure to ask the right questions. Do they have an accredited sustainability programme following the GSTC criteria with independent ASI audits? If no, then why not? Is it because this is an addition to their revenue model? Is it cheap and easy, or is it rigorous and accountable? Are they transparent? Are they carbon neutral or aim to be before 2030? Or are they still trying to remove plastic straws and plastic bottles?".

How have the needs and demands of the modern traveller changed from those before? How is the industry currently adapting to this?

"There were 1.3 billion international travellers last year, and by 2030 it will exceed 1.8 billion. Add local travel to this and we contribute massively in both a positive and negative way".

"According to an annual Sustainable Travel Report by Booking.com, there is growing demand for sustainable travel since 2016, when the Paris Climate Agreement was signed: 34 per cent in 2016, 65 per cent in 2017, and 87 per cent in 2018. In 2019, 71 per cent want more sustainable travel choices, 68 per cent would like the money they spend to go back to the community, and 72 per cent seek authentic local experiences".

"The travel industry is growing by around 4 per cent annually and contributes 8 per cent to global carbon emissions, with 20 per cent from the hospitality industry. If the travel and tourism is a country, it would be the fifth largest emitter of carbon in the world".

"There is improvement but for most hotels and tourism companies, it's 'businesses as usual'. Many people continue to travel with complete disregard for carbon footprints and negative impacts on communities and the environment".

"In our industry, sustainability has been voluntary and unregulated since the 80's. Today, more hotels commit to sustainability but few are truly accountable AND transparent. Fewer hotels aim to be carbon zero and support the 17 Global Goals for sustainable development in the next 5 years. Most hotels - large and small, chains as well as independents - are doing the bare minimum in order to claim that they have more sustainable. Today, travellers, employees, influencers and media notice this and call it greenwash".

What affect is the changing attitudes towards sustainability among institutional investors having on hotel development and operations?

"Attitudes are changing, but not fast nor conscious enough. Few owners and investors have a long term view on the ROI of sustainability and invest in the development and operations phase to be carbon neutral, few invest in rigorous and accredited sustainability programmes for accountability, and few insist on total transparency to build and maintain consumer trust".