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GUEST: Ovation's Steiner on Climate Change

Environmental protection is squarely on the list of critical issues for the business travel industry as companies no less influential than ABB, Cisco and EDS have begun taking action. ABB favors rail over auto or air travel. Cisco is trying to cut its travel budget by \$100 million, partly through investments in remote conferencing. EDS plans to replace most inter-office travel in Australia and New Zealand with videoconferencing, cutting domestic flights by up to 30 percent.

Ovation Travel Group is one of a few travel management companies to have launched services designed to help clients manage, offset or reduce emissions produced by business travel. Executive vice president Michael Steiner adds his views to the discussion with this, his first guest column in The Beat ...

I wanted to comment on *The Beat's* 2007 Bones of Contention list, dated Jan. 19, in which you argue, "When it comes to accounting for, reducing or offsetting the environmental impact of business travel, the federal government and corporate sector in the United States remain woefully behind." I fully agree with *The Beat's* assertion. Considering the initiatives going on around the globe to repair the environment (both by government proxy and industrial shifts), U.S.-based decision makers and frequent flyers are moving too slowly to address this critical global issue. Business travel is a significant contributor to CO2 emissions, and industry players should take on some level of responsibility and develop solutions.

So what can we do? While some might argue that organizations should consider reducing business travel by expanding the use of videoconferencing, most businesses will find that to be an impractical solution. A viable approach is carbon offsetting—essentially supporting renewable energy programs, improving energy efficiency and restoring forests globally. Offsetting carbon emissions allows companies to become part of the solution to climate change by supporting the reduction of CO2 equal to a company's carbon footprint. While carbon offsetting is not a panacea for the climate crisis, many environmental experts agree that it is a reasonable step to take.

Other initiatives being considered by companies include partnering with suppliers that have adopted environmentally responsible practices and using low-emission transportation whenever possible.

Last year I watched Al Gore's Academy Award-nominated and eye-opening documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth." While critics debate the fine points of the film, many agree with Mr. Gore's findings and predictions concerning the consequences of global climate changes due to human-generated greenhouse gases. The same month I read a somewhat contrarian take on global warming, Michael Crichton's "State of Fear." This fictional thriller expresses skepticism of the claim that global warming is real and imminent. I, like many Americans, became captivated with this issue in 2006.

A few months after I watched the Gore movie and reading the Crichton book, I found myself in Budapest at the global shareholder's meeting of Radius. A key topic of discussion was Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. This principle essentially maintains that organizations should make decisions based not only on financial factors (i.e. profits, or shareholder value) but also on both the short and the long-term social and environmental consequences of their activities. Within the context of that conversation, global warming and carbon offsetting initiatives were discussed. I was amazed to learn about the strong environmental directives coming from corporations in Europe and about the progress my colleagues in the United Kingdom and other areas of the world were making with their clients in addressing CSR objectives. I was equally amazed when I thought about the almost non-existent focus on these matters by U.S. companies. The concept of CSR, and specifically the global warming crisis, hadn't crossed the Atlantic to Corporate America.

In November of 2006, The Ovation Travel Group made a business decision to take our own internal travel carbon neutral. In addition, last month we became the first TMC in the United States to launch a carbon-offsetting program, ECOvation, for the corporate community. Our goal in initiating this program is to help lead the way to a cleaner, greener environment. While we are pleased to lead the way in the U.S., I look forward to our peers, suppliers and other travel industry organizations adopting similar programs.

Now that Ovation has gone through the process of becoming carbon neutral, I can say from experience that it's incredibly simple and gratifying. For our clients, the process is equally straightforward. Here's how it works. Ovation partners with a leading carbon offsetting company, Carbonfund.org, which invests in a variety of alternative energy projects in the U.S. and globally. Ovation provides detailed client travel data to Carbonfund.org. Carbonfund.org uses a carbon calculator that employs statistics from the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Information Agency to create a cost analysis of the client's "carbon footprint" on the environment. The client then contributes to Carbonfund.org initiatives to offset the carbon emissions produced by their business travel.

I strongly encourage other TMCs, corporations and business travelers to take steps in this direction, as global warming is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed today by Corporate America.

~ Michael Steiner is executive vice president with Ovation Travel Group.