



Case Study

John Austin Half

On the face of it, running is probably one of the least environmentally damaging sports around. You can open your door and head out into the great outdoors, without the need to drive anywhere – carbon emissions: zero. You don't need much kit to go running – a pair of trainers (and a decent bra for the ladies) is the main requirement and the only thing you are wearing out is a bit of shoe rubber. Runners tend to stick to roads and well-trodden paths – causing minimal disturbance to plants and animals, and they leave little or no trace behind them.

So far, so green, but scale that up by several hundred people and call it a “running event” and the environmental impacts starts to make themselves felt. With more and more people being bitten by the running bug, so the number of mass participation events around the country is increasing. With several hundred, or several thousand runners congregating in one place for an event, their collective impact then becomes very noticeable – particularly in terms of the waste generated, the transport required to get them to the event location and all the “stuff” that gets handed out (and then often thrown away in the goody bags at the end).

Yet the benefits that running events bring can be huge – they attract large numbers of participants and spectators to an area, who often spend money in that local economy; they provide an incentive for runners – a goal to work towards; they are, via sponsorship, the source of large sums of money for charity, they encourage more people to get involved and take part and they can also be great fun. The challenge then is to find a way to balance the unquestionable benefits that such events bring with the detrimental effect they can have on the natural environment.

Greening a “half”

Earth to Ocean (E2O) has recently been working with the organisers of a new half marathon event in the New Forest to explore ways to reduce the environmental impact of 500 runners striding round a 13.1 mile off-road course in a sensitive and much-loved forest setting. The “John Austin Half” was run for the first time on March 13th as a way of raising funds for the Oakhaven Hospice in Lymington and the aim of the event was to give all participants a great day out. The organisers had got permission from the Forestry Commission to stage the event and, aware of the sensitivity of the environment in which the race was being run, wanted to do what they could to make sure that any environmental impacts were minimised.

At an initial meeting in December, we discussed the four main areas of environmental impact that the race was likely to have:

- Waste – from food, water bottles, packaging etc
- Transport – people getting to and from the Race HQ
- Procurement – equipment needed to run the race (banners, signage marshal vests) plus water, food, items for the goody bags



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- Wildlife and habitats – any damage to the forest and its wildlife from the 500 runners

The Race HQ itself was the sports hall at Brockenhurst College, a permanent building with toilets and changing rooms and the organising team could therefore do little to influence things like lighting, heat, and water use.



Measures taken

Waste: The main aim was to reduce waste production in the first place but then to ensure that as much waste as possible was recycled. To reduce paper use, pre-event registration was mostly done on-line and the organisers used viral e-mail to raise awareness of the event as much as possible (versus the more traditional route of putting fliers in goody bags at other events). No race information was posted out – everything was emailed and race numbers were collected by participants on the day.

The main waste product around the course was water bottles and it had been made very clear to runners that littering on the course was prohibited and that any water bottles discarded should be given to a marshal around the course.

Additional waste bins were provided by New Forest District Council to aid recycling and these were labelled either “recycling” or “general waste” and were sited on the Brockenhurst College Site. Marshalls were given bin bags to collect water bottles (all recyclable) and any gel wrappers / food packaging that runners needed to discard along the course.

To avoid getting cold before the start of a race, many runners wear an old sweatshirt or even a plastic bin-bag which they then discard at the start line. At the John Austin half, a service was provided whereby runners could leave clothing at the start line which was then taken back to the Race HQ and could be collected at the end of the race. Runners were told that any unwanted / uncollected clothing would be given to a textile recycler.

Transport: Given the proximity of the event to a mainline train station (Brockenhurst – on the London to Bournemouth line), it was hoped that some competitors would come by train and E2O



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tried to contact South West Trains to see if any kind of incentive could be offered by way of reduced ticket prices for people to come by train. No response was received from SWT however and the fact that the first train into Brockenhurst from London arrived too late for the race start may also have acted as a deterrent! Nonetheless, race organisers gave out information on accessing the site via public transport and car-sharing was suggested and encouraged. To try and encourage runners to come by train and stay for the weekend, E2O, through the New Forest District Council, contacted local accommodation providers to ask if they would put together a special offer for any runners arriving by train and making a weekend of it. After being told about the race, the local bike hire company, based opposite the College, offered a 25% discount on cycle hire for any runners wanting to hire a bike for 6 months after the event.

Procurement: Some of the arrangements had already been put in place prior to E2O getting involved, such as the decision to give all participants a cotton T-shirt and a medal, and to give out bottles of water along the course. These kinds of procurement decisions can make a big difference to the event's environmental footprint, but of course have to be balanced against the expectations of runners and the budget for the event.

Runners put in a lot of effort, in terms of both the training and the fundraising to take part in an event such as this and they expect some kind of recognition at the end of the event – a token to prove that they have taken part and succeeded in their challenge. For many events, this equates to a T-shirt and /or a medal, often with a drink and a snack bar and perhaps some discount vouchers for local running shops. Straw polls suggest that a T-shirt is the favourite goody-bag item but often these are cheaply produced, poor quality items that don't wear well and aren't particularly good for running in. The alternative, a "technical" running top will cost significantly more and therefore will entail a higher entry fee for the event.

Because this was a charity event, the organisers relied heavily on volunteer effort and the generosity of sponsors and it would therefore have been difficult to make demands that products meet certain environmental criteria. The organisers were keen to try and find alternatives to metal medals but recycled / wooden alternatives are very costly and not readily available. Similarly the T-shirts were printed by a local company who did this for a good price and it would have been hard to justify spending more of the race profits (which are all given to charity) on more expensive T-shirts (bamboo / organic cotton, or a technical running top).

In terms of purchasing equipment for the event, no additional signage was printed as this was all re-used from previous local running events. Similarly all the marshals' uniforms were made available by the local running club so that nothing new needed to be bought in.

A decision had been taken to use bottled water rather than cups of water and the water was donated by sponsors.



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Wildlife and habitats

The race route was agreed with the Forestry Commission and carefully planned to avoid any particularly sensitive sites due to ground-nesting birds or rare plants which could have been damaged with so many people coming through in a short space of time.

As the start of the race was a 15 minute walk away from the race HQ, two portaloos were provided near the start line but runners were encouraged to use the facilities at the HQ before heading for the start.

Lessons Learned

Waste

The NFDC bins at Race HQ for recycling and general waste were not clearly enough labelled – they needed signs above the bin, not on the side so a key lesson is that even if the bins are supplied, the organisers probably need to arrange the signage for them. More bins were needed at the start line too (which was 15 minutes away from the HQ, in the Forest itself) – people had rubbish but didn't know where to put it.

On race day itself, the choice of catering helped to reduce waste generated in that much of the food was home-made (cakes, biscuits, flapjacks etc) and therefore didn't come in packaging. Polystyrene cups were used, and there are greener alternatives to these although time and cost implications may preclude the use of mugs or compostable cups.

Despite strongly worded requests to refrain from dropping bottles along the course, many bottles of water still needed to be picked up after the race. This could have been partly due to the fact that it was not made explicit to runners that marshals would be situated, say, 500m and 1,000m after each water station. If a runner chose to hold on to the bottle and run with it, they didn't know how long it would be before the next marshal point, and therefore a bin bag.

Transport

It is impossible to tell how people arrived at the HQ because no monitoring was done of methods of transport. Given that runners were collecting numbers on the day, and therefore needed to "sign in", it would have been possible to ask people individually how they had arrived. This would have provided valuable information which could have helped inform planning for subsequent events.

Disappointingly, very few accommodation providers took up the opportunity to offer a special package to those arriving by train, despite the event taking place "out of season".



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Procurement

As this was a charity event, much of the content of the goody bags was donated by sponsors. The result was an eclectic mix of items, many of which were unrelated to running. The sponsors enabled the event to happen however and so wanted to get their messaging across – how can this be done in a more environmentally friendly way? The bags themselves were of the strong paper type, which was preferable to plastic bags.

Using bottled water, rather than cups and tap water, meant a lot of additional waste was created, since many runners just took a couple of sips before throwing the rest of the water away. A possible alternative would be to provide both bottled water and cups of water so that those who just want a quick drink can use the cup, while those who think they might want to drink in short bursts over a longer period could grab a bottle.

Alternatives to medals and T-shirts have been suggested – e.g. mugs, but much will depend on whether these can be provided by sponsors and the kind of reception this would get from runners.

Wildlife and Habitats

The route was very well signposted and marshalled and so runners stuck closely to the approved route. As much of the race took place on established gravelled forest paths and along a concrete former airstrip, any trampling and “churning up” of terrain was kept to a minimum.

Despite pleas to use the facilities at the Race HQ, many runners were caught short at the start of the race and two toilets were inadequate to cope with the demand!

Conclusions

There is a real tension between staging an event for charity and lowering its environmental impact because cost plays such a huge part in the decision making, especially with regard to procurement. The organisers of this event were not keen to badge it as any kind of “eco” race as they felt that the greenest option would have been not to stage the race at all. The main aim of the event was to raise a lot of money for a very good cause and this was, understandably, the message that they wished to promote.

It is by no means impossible to lower the environmental impact of such an event however, and the lessons learned from 2011 can be used for future event planning.

The main points to consider for future race events are:



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- Early consideration of procurement needs e.g. goody bag items – if appropriate sponsors are approached early enough, more costly, but less environmentally damaging items could be included
- Monitoring and measuring things like mode of transport. If this information is collected, it may help convince public transport operators and accommodation providers to offer special deals.
- Thorough briefings for both marshals and participants to ensure that everyone is clear about what should be done with litter while on the course
- Clearer signage needed on everything from recycling bins, to toilets!
- Clear and positive communication is needed to explain to participants the benefits of the environmental measures that are being taken. The aim shouldn't be to turn the race into an "eco extravaganza" but to make sure that, in having fun and raising money for a great cause, harm isn't done to the wider environment