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Green Businesses Jump On Opportunity in Denver

Firms Hope Crowds At Convention Have Environmental Bent

By STEPHANIE SIMON
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DENVER -- The Democratic National Committee promised to make this the greenest convention ever. And that is making some entrepreneurs see green.

Viewing the convention as a launching pad for sales, small entrepreneurs and international companies alike have set up shop around town, trying to capitalize on their environmental credentials.




Bike-borrowing stations, set up by Humana and nonprofit group Bikes Belong around Denver, measure their success by miles ridden, calories burned and metric tons of carbon emissions averted.

"We've got the best gimmick," she said.

Crowds were sparse during the first hour of the festival, which was sponsored by the Solar Energy Industries Association. But a few blocks away, Denver's brick-paved pedestrian 16th Street Mall was packed with delegates, journalists and gawkers. Under a green awning, Jennifer Allen hawked organic tangerine juice and marveled at how many bottles she had sold. She had staked out her corner all summer, only to find Denver locals frustratingly slow to take to her fruits, veggies and drinks, sold under the slogan "Organic Alien." But the convention -- that was something else again.

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On Wednesday afternoon, two dozen solar-energy firms took over a parking lot outside Coors Field, the Denver baseball stadium, to pitch their home-energy systems with freebies such as sun-baked chocolate-chip cookies, smoothies churned up in a solar-powered blender and tubes of sunscreen clipped to key chains. USA Solar Power, based in Littleton, Colo., even brought along livestock -- two goats dressed in red, white and blue and wearing buttons proclaiming "Goats for Obaaaa-ma."

"Don't let rising energy costs get your goat!" saleswoman Julie Fields called. She smiled.

"People from all walks of life are interested in organic," Ms. Allen said with some amazement. She was hoping, she said, that locals would see the crowds clustered around her booth and decide this was a movement worth joining, even after the convention leaves town.

About 1,200 miles away in San Francisco, Larry Weiss was also counting on a green-convention bounce. The chief technology officer for CleanWell products, Mr. Weiss secured a contract to place dispensers of his hand sanitizer in and around the convention. Mr. Weiss touts the sanitizer, made from thyme and oregano, as a safer, natural alternative to chemical cleansers. And he pegged the Democrats as his ideal market.

"The group of people there is looking for solutions to problems," Mr. Weiss said. "And health care is a problem."

Humana Inc., a health-services company based in Louisville, Ky., is riding the green wave by sponsoring bike-borrowing stations set up around town. Humana and a nonprofit group called Bikes Belong have spread 1,000 bikes around the city, and they are being used, and seen, around town. At last count, the bike-sharing program had notched 12,067 miles ridden, 374,098 calories burned -- and 4.3 metric tons of carbon emissions averted.

Perhaps the biggest day for green marketing was Sunday, before the convention officially began. Denver sponsored a Green Frontier Fest in a local park that drew an estimated 7,000 visitors, who browsed booths pitching everything from biodegradable coffins to soy-based insulation to worm-fueled composting.

The city has gone all-out to promote itself as a green destination. Tourism is already one of Denver's biggest industries, generating an estimated \$2.8 billion a year, and local boosters hope to kick that up a notch by touting vacations and conventions here as planet-friendly.

In preparation for the convention, hundreds of hotel and restaurant managers attended city-sponsored workshops to learn green tips: making key cards from biodegradable plastic, setting up in-room recycling bins and installing energy-efficient ovens.

The Metro Denver Convention and Visitors Bureau is promoting those efforts to meeting planners who may be considering holding conferences in Denver. City officials have even set up an online carbon calculator so potential guests can figure out exactly how much greenhouse gas they would emit with a trip here -- and how to offset that by investing in, say, a local windmill.

"We're definitely leveraging this," said Angela Berardino, a spokeswoman for the visitors bureau.

Ms. Berardino is also banking on media photos of the convention featuring, even if in the background, images of downtown solar panels, recycling bins and zero-emission shuttle buses. "To have 17,000 journalists here from around the world to see all this is priceless," she said.

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