

EXECUTIVE PROFILE
DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL
SPORTS & ENTERTAINMENT
BRIAN GRANT
ABM INDUSTRIES

by Wendy Pearl

As director of operations for national sports and entertainment at ABM Industries, Brian Grant is on the front line of numerous sustainability initiatives across the company's many stadium and arena clients.

His passion for the topic reaches beyond the obvious impact on the environment to what sustainability means for the bottom line. ABM is a full-service facilities management and maintenance provider with more than 100,000 employees in over 250 locations offering services from housekeeping, engineering, electrical, technical to parking.

Grant joined in 2022 after serving as senior director of operations at SoFi Stadium and the senior associate director for facilities and project management at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

Grant was a part of the leadership team that opened SoFi Stadium and YouTube Theater at the Hollywood Park site in 2020 as well as a facility renovation at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in 2019. As a venue operator, Grant has overseen the housekeeping and facility maintenance at all his venues and has an understanding of how operational efficiencies can impact waste diversion, energy efficiency and water conservation. Grant graduated from the University of Minnesota with a Bachelor of Arts degree in broadcast journalism and a Bachelor of Science degree in sports management and started his career working at UM's venues including what is now Huntington Bank Stadium, where he was put in charge of starting a zero-waste program.

"I looked at that as an opportunity to plant my flag," said Grant, a 15-year industry veteran.

"It became something special that felt personal to me. I've been fortunate in my career to be places at formative times."

What has changed in that time?

Brian Grant: Five years ago, 10 years ago, sustainability might have been a nice goal for the environment, but now at least from my perspective, there are some actual, tangible financial benefits to being sustainable with the way that we manage these large-scale venues.

Think of the cost even generally of a kilowatt or megawatt hour in Los Angeles, that's not cheap. If you can find a way to reduce that lower lighting consumption — work on some on-demand or dynamic lighting schedules or lower the amount of heating and cooling you do in a space.

At the end of the day, it's going to save you some money. There has been a paradigm shift in the importance of sustainability that goes beyond just what it does for the environment. There is tangible financial impact to some of those decisions now.

Nearly a decade ago, LA Memorial Coliseum started a zero-waste program. What were those early conversations like?

Not a lot of people were doing that or going after that certification at that time. We looked at that program as a pilot for how things could work. Folks were happy to support it, but it came down to “How can we make it not cost me any money?” Because on some level, we were going to add labor to make sure that all that waste was properly sorted and distributed.

And we were going to have cost changes. At the time, it was cheaper to order non-compostable, non-recyclable materials, so the food and beverage partner needed to absorb some costs. It was, “How can we do that without passing on additional costs to the patrons?”

How did sponsors and vendors step up?

Before we knew it, there were enough people there — plus the value of the recycling commodity, the aluminum and plastic — that we were able to go to the GM of the building and say that program would be “cost neutral, at worst.” That allowed us to open a ton of doors and a ton of gates to have additional conversations about how to make that program work.

How do you gauge success with a program like that?

The program is now routinely diverting between 92 and 94 percent of its waste. Ninety percent is a baseline for what’s considered zero waste.

That program really took that model of “How can we do something sustainable? How can we be responsible?” — both on the environmental impact side and the financial side — and make those two ends meet. People bonded together and found ways to be creative and make something that at one point was a cost, but really came out neutral in the end.

How do patrons factor into the sustainability plan?

Early on, we decided we wanted to minimize decisions that patrons had to make. It was as simple as we didn’t want to create confusion about where any particular item ended up in terms of the waste stream. So, the Coliseum doesn’t recognize trash. There is no such thing as trash on their concourse. They don’t generate it. They don’t expect it. It’s just compost and recycling. It came down to the idea of if I eat it, I compost it. If I drink it, I recycle it. That’s as simple as it’s going to be.



Brian Grant with ABM Sports and Entertainment California Regional Manager Jorge Castillo.

As a venue services provider, I want fans back in the seats as fast as we can. If we are going to give them any pause to figure out where to put trash, they are probably not going to engage in it because they are worried about getting back to the seat, too. I'm up for minimizing as much of that engagement as possible.

At some point I hope we are talking where engagement with patrons is second nature because they know we are all already operating in a sustainable manner — with water, or energy or waste — all of that being handled appropriately to lower the carbon footprint as a whole.

What fan-facing innovation is most exciting?

Within ABM sports and entertainment, nobody loves aluminum more than I do. And we've seen that proliferation. A lot of our venues have switched to aluminum cups. And what's the benefit of an aluminum cup? It can be recycled infinitely. There is always a market for aluminum because I can melt it down and turn it right back into the same thing. Those are a huge change to the recycling market.

ABM was involved early in planning and achieving Golden 1 Center's LEED certification (ABM provides the janitorial, engineering and parking services). What were some of the key learnings at the Sacramento venue, which opened in 2016?

We were brought in very early in the construction process for that venue. So, we were able to bring together industry knowledge that allowed us to head off some of the challenges — how the building would function, LEED certification, the processes — in a very proactive manner.

Today we are seeing, especially with some of the changes in the cost of energy and the way Golden 1 is managed, it has some unique building features. The solar array on the roof and the energy that it generates — in some cases, we generate enough energy at Golden 1 that we are donating some of that energy back to the grid in Sacramento.



How does on-demand and predictive modeling make it possible with AI and metrics to optimize energy demands and timing for heating and cooling the building?

There is better data behind some of the decisions that we are making, which allows us to be more sustainable and make more educated decisions with the information that we have — when do hallway and office lights dim — and it allows us to really tailor how we manage the venue.

What role does education and professional development play in the adoption and success of sustainability practices?

Professional development is hard in a lot of cases because we are moving so quickly. But I also think there is a unique niche culture around these venues. Certainly, from where I sit, my goal in this conversation or any conversation like this would be only to benefit anybody else who is struggling with these decisions. Interconnecting people is where we find that value. That's where the development lies. A lot of resources can be gained, and shared.

How is technology altering the collection and distribution of information at SoFi Stadium?

SoFi's "digital twin" allows them to take what are physical assets — all their HVAC, chillers, MEP mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems — and put those into a digital model that they can monitor and track. It gives them an opportunity to recognize areas that might be operating outside of normal or ideal operating conditions. It allows them to see things in real time and make educated decisions.

What are the added benefits on the maintenance side?

If you can run equipment 10 percent less than full load? That's a win. If I can run equipment less than I am currently, that is only going to increase the longevity of that equipment and lifespan. Now, that's driving down my overall operating cost because that equipment will live longer before it needs replacement or maintenance.

What other initiatives have been successful at SoFi Stadium?

Following years of drought, water management was a huge thing for them. There is a massive cistern under a portion of their building that collects all the rainwater that comes off their roof. They have a massive roof structure that covers the largest NFL stadium in the world, so when it does rain, that's pretty deep water that can be collected and managed.

And we can use that reclaimed water for irrigation or donate it back into the community where it can be treated and reused.

Making money is always top of mind. Do you have an example?

If we had this conversation five or 10 years ago it stemmed from a social responsibility standpoint. It was socially responsible to make decisions that were more sustainable. Having this conversation today, it's fiscally responsible to make sustainable decisions. It cost me the most to haul trash. It cost me the least to haul recycling. And somewhere in the middle is compost. In most cases if you can reduce the amount of trash that you haul, you will spend less money. In the case of the Coliseum, they make, and I mean make, \$40,000 a year in recycling. Even after hauling fees, that's \$40,000 to their bottom line.

What advice do you give venues that are just getting underway with their sustainability programs?

For anybody that is looking at developing a sustainability plan and making sustainability decisions, think about the relationships that you already have. The relationships that can develop. Maybe there is some subject matter expertise, but a sustainability journey shared within an organization is a really cool and unique way — if done appropriately — to galvanize staff together on something that is impactful not only to the organization, but the overall community and the environment as a whole.

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