

HotelExecutive

You Are What You 'Meet:' Attending Business Conferences Shouldn't Have to Mean a Break from Healthy Eating and Lifestyle Habits

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Up until recently, attending a business conference may have also meant long sedentary periods of physical inactivity—sitting in airports, sitting on planes and even more sitting in conference room meetings. The dining experience, often didn't work to enhance healthfulness, consisting of high-calorie snacks and meals that may have sustained participants' energy levels, but didn't necessarily sustain their waist lines.

The recent trend toward the greening of the conference center and hotel industry has also come to include the 'greening of guests.' Conference centers are taking a holistic approach to sustaining the environment that not only involves incorporating environmentally friendly paper products, building and cleaning materials, and lighting and landscaping, but also a commitment to providing the highest quality foods that sustain a healthy lifestyle and help the planet.

Minimizing our Impact

During the last 10 years, Aramark Harrison Lodging (AHL) has worked to develop its Planet EVERgreen official "greening" program. As AHL's vice president of sustainability and environmental education, Karen Wittig's goal is to communicate a mission of sound environmental practices and healthy living that guests will take home with them.

"In our conference centers, we continue to develop our sustainable cuisine program that serves only seafood species not currently under threat of extinction and produce and foods grown and raised without pesticides or chemical fertilizers," Wittig said. "By purchasing organic and sustainable products, the program minimizes waste and the impact on the environment."

Last year, The Rainbow Room at Lake Powell Resorts and Marina, located on the Utah/Arizona border, introduced a prix-fixe sustainable menu. It serves guests seafood chosen from Monterey Bay's "best choice" National Seafood Guide, including farm-raised striped bass and blue cornmeal dusted farm-raised trout, as well as Hearst Ranch grass-fed beef.

"We are committed to increasing the use of organic, heirloom fruits and vegetables grown locally whenever possible, as well as eliminating the use of trans-fats and incorporating dairy products that are free of added bovine growth hormones (BGH)," said Cathy McKeever, director of sales and marketing, Lake Powell Resorts & Marinas.

The dining rooms at Kalaloch Lodge and Lake Quinault Lodge located at Olympic National Park & Forest in Washington state serve seafood chosen from Monterey Bay's "best choice" National Seafood Guide, as well as Hearst grass-fed beef. In addition,

Kalaloch lodge serves fresh Alaskan Wild King Salmon and crème brulee, which is made with BGH-free milk.

Other AHL managed restaurants located on national parks that are implementing sustainable cuisine programs available for meeting and conference events include Mesa Verde National Park, Shenandoah National Park, Denali National Park & Preserve and Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve.

Planning Healthy Menus

There are a number of resources available to help meeting planners plan menus that will provide guests with more opportunities to make healthy eating decisions.

The publication, "Eat Smart North Carolina: Guidelines for Health Foods and Beverages at Meetings, Gatherings and Events," issues practical guidelines for anyone in charge of food served at events, helping them choose lower-fat and lower-calorie foods and drinks. The guide can be used in working with sales staff and chefs to plan delicious, nutritious meals and breaks for event attendees.

The Department of Health in New York state also issued some general guidelines that include the following:

General Guidelines:

- Serve low-calorie and low-fat foods
- Serve fruits and vegetable whenever possible
- Serve small portions (e.g., cut bagels in halves or quarters, etc.)
- Serve milk (fat free or one percent) or 100 percent fruit or vegetable juice, water or iced tea (unsweetened) instead of soft drinks
- Lunch and dinner don't have to include a heavy dessert – fresh fruit, a fruit crisp or cobbler, small cookies, etc. are just fine
- Include a vegetarian option at all meals
- Provide reduced-fat or low-fat milk for coffee rather than crème or half and half
- Registration forms should provide space to indicate food allergies or dietary restrictions
- Provide pitchers and bottles of water

Unhealthy snacking at break times can produce just as many pitfalls as larger main meals. According to Brian Stapleton, corporate executive chef at AHL, gone are the days of providing just three or four package menus of snack options. With so many people making special requests for gluten-free, peanut free and other dietary restricted items, meeting planners are now offering an overall list of options with a per person price attached, so attendees can customize options to meet their needs.

"While nacho cheese and chocolate chip cookies are still in high demand, we're seeing more and more requests for energy bars, whole grain bars and low fat chocolate as ingredients," Stapleton said. "People still want flavor; so we try and get creative by offering dried fruit dipped in chocolate or gourmet potato chips cooked in olive oil, flavored with rosemary."

Stapleton says it's all about offering something healthy, but with a special flair that adds flavor. Other popular requests off the menu include sushi stations or gourmet dips, such as red pepper hummus served with flat bread made with organic flour and herb spices.

Additional suggestions for health breaks offered by the New York Department of Health include the following:

Food Suggestions for Breaks (a.m. & p.m.):

- Bagels with low-fat cream cheese or jams (generally lower in fat and calories than cream cheese). Have the bagels cut in halves or quarters
- Fresh fruit – whole or cut up (with a yogurt dip)
- Whole grain muffins (cut in half if not serving mini muffins) and whole grain breads instead of Danish, croissants or doughnuts
- Low-fat yogurt
- Pretzels, hot pretzels (cut in pieces) with mustard
- Lightly seasoned popcorn
- Graham crackers, fig newtons
- Dried fruit or trail mix
- Raw vegetables with low-fat dip

Active Bodies Produce Active Minds

In addition to food choices, the role of physical activity is becoming more apparent in the prevention of obesity that can lead to chronic and debilitating diseases. More meeting planners are looking for ways to incorporate physical activity breaks at longer meetings, which also serve to improve attendees' concentration and their ability to participate in important tasks at hand. It also can help them get a better night's sleep.

Planning a meeting at one of AHL's national park settings can make a number of outdoor recreational activities readily accessible to conference attendees. These can also, in turn, serve as employee bonding activities.

For example at Lake Quinault Lodge at Olympic National Park and Forest attendees can spend an afternoon fishing off the docks for steelhead or salmon. Smaller board retreats can get away on a luxurious houseboat at Lake Powell that may include a dive into the lake.

A stay at tranquil Deer Creek Resort and Conference Center in Columbus, Ohio offers hiking along the park's scenic woodland, meadows and shoreline, which might even include a glimpse at wildlife. The 18-hole championship 350-acre golf course also offers challenging and exciting games for golfers of all skill levels. In addition, Deer Creek State Park offers a 1.2 mile loop trail suitable for novice to intermediate cyclists.

Additional suggestions for incorporating physical activity at meetings include:

- Choose a location for your meeting where participants can easily and safely take a walk
- Choose a hotel that has good fitness facilities – a fitness room, a pool, etc.

- Organize an early morning physical activity, such as a walk or a low impact fitness class
- Encourage participants to take the stairs
- Consider telling people that the dress code for the meeting is casual – this allows people to move around freely
- Encourage networking by suggesting that people take a walk together and talk about their common interests
- Schedule brief activity breaks in the morning and afternoon. Have participants stand up and walk in place or have someone lead a stretching break. People will be better able to pay attention the rest of the meeting.

In conclusion, meetings clearly don't have to mean taking a break from the healthy habits practiced at home. Adding a bit of healthy culinary flair and a few fun physical activities can help generate more enthusiasm among attendees for the meeting's purpose and might even help to inspire those break-through, ah-ha ideas that will make the required bit of extra thought in the planning process worthwhile to your business's bottom line.

For a complete list of these and other health meeting tips, visit www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/prevent/guidelines.htm

To download a copy of "Eat Smart North Carolina: Guidelines for Health Foods and Beverages at Meetings, Gatherings and Events," visit http://www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com/programs_tools/worksites/healthy_meeting_guide.html

As President, ARAMARK Harrison Lodging, Bruce Fears is responsible for ARAMARK's operations at over 50 conference centers, corporate training centers and specialty hotels in educational environments, as well as 14 state parks and other resort operations across the United States. He returned to ARAMARK in May 2005 as Executive Vice President, ARAMARK Parks and Resorts. He assumed his current position in October 2005, following the integration of ARAMARK's conference center and corporate training business with its parks and resorts business. Mr. Fears received his bachelor's of arts degree from Bridgewater College in Virginia and continued through programs at University of London's School of Economics and University of Florida's School of Management. He currently sits on the National Board of the Travel Industry of America and is a founder of the Grand Circle Association. He previously served on the California State Park concessioners board, has testified before Congress on National Park Concession Policy and was the sole U.S. presenter at the World Congress of Parks in Durban, South Africa in 2004. Mr. Fears can be contacted at 425-957-9708 or fears-bruce@aramark.com