



Linda E. Schwartz

In light of tight budgets and changing tastes, event planners are becoming increasingly resourceful in their approach to food and beverage. F&B is a large part of most annual meeting budgets, and the onsite gastronomic experience can greatly enhance — or detract from — the attendees' overall experience.

Have Your Cake and Eat It, Too: Keep F&B Quality High and Costs Low

Much like air travel, no one goes to a conference mainly for the cuisine. However, the quality of your onsite food and beverage service greatly influences the overall attendee experience, and meeting evaluations typically include numerous compliments and/or complaints about F&B.

As the economy remains sluggish, most organizations have been loathe to increase event registration fees over the past few years. At the same time, hotels — much like the airlines — are finding inventive and often subtle ways to pass along price increases.

Here are 10 tips from SmithBucklin and Courtesy Associates Event Services professionals Jessica Cremer, Pat Dwyer, Rhonda Grizzard, Melissa Huston, Eric Johnson, Perry Juliano, Kelly Marks, Regina Mohr and Susan Gilbert for controlling food and beverage expenses while meeting the expectations of today's attendees.

1 Do you want coffee with that cup? While the tables for a plated lunch typically include a coffee cup in the setup, you may find that the hot java, along with iced tea, now carries an extra charge. Will your group be satisfied with just coffee, just iced tea or neither?

2 Carbs are bad for you anyway. When choosing a lunch or dinner menu, be aware that bread and rolls may not be included in the price of the meal. Some attendees may be dis-

appointed, while others may not even notice the difference.

3 Vegetarian doesn't mean a salad. It also doesn't mean a plate of soggy steamed vegetables. Diet- and health-conscious individuals, in addition to vegetarians, are opting for the "vegetarian meal" and they expect something both creative and tasty.

4 This won't be the attendees' last meal. Portion sizes are becoming more reasonable. Rather than trying to stretch a tight budget by serving a wide variety of lower-priced options, work with the F&B staff to become more creative. With a buffet, reducing just a few items from each station can bring down the budget without lessening the quality of the remaining choices.

5 Bottled water isn't green — and it isn't inexpensive, either. Once the rage, bottled water is being eliminated from most bars, refreshment breaks and in other areas where high-consumption/high-volume usage is expected. Water stations (tap water in urns, pitchers, etc.) are becoming the norm, and they are easier on the organization's budget as well. Some hotels impose a one-time, per-person water charge to cover all tap water used by the group, typically ranging from \$0.75 to \$0.95 per attendee.

6 "I'll have a White Cloud, please." Offering one or two specialty drinks themed to your event can help reduce the need to have more expansive

and expensive selections at the bar. Promote the themed drinks, and you'll add to the excitement while cutting your bar tab. Also, be aware that some hotels are imposing a bar setup fee in addition to the bartender fee: This can be difficult to negotiate as it is not shown as a labor charge.

7 "I'll have what they're having." Talk to the venue about what is on the menu for the conferences and meetings occurring right before and after your event. You should be able to save money if you piggyback on the other menus, as the chef can save by ordering a larger quantity of the same food.

8 Make snack time healthful and fun. Healthful snacks such as nutrition bars and fruit can strain your budget. Consider a "make your own trail mix" buffet, which was a big hit at one recent conference — and far less expensive than other options.

9 RSVP, if you please. Many groups are asking attendees to indicate in advance (via the registration form or other means) if they will attend the onsite lunches, dinners and receptions. This helps gauge attendance at each function so the event staff can provide more accurate guarantees to hotels and convention centers. Not only does this cut expenses, but it reduces food waste as well.

10 Elvis has left the building. Entertainment at receptions, once thought to be necessary to the overall experience, is being eliminated in

many cases, with part of the savings being used to enhance the F&B. For example, instead of a live band, groups are opting for a disc jockey for a very limited number of hours or even piped-in music. Because one of the key benefits of any conference is networking, attendees often appreciate chatting with peers in a quieter atmosphere while enjoying good food and beverages.

Conference F&B truly is a moving target. Yesterday's "musts" (such as a full open bar, bottled water and live entertainment) are disappearing faster than the proverbial tray of breakfast breads (which, in turn, is being replaced by cereal and fruit!). In light of tight budgets and changing tastes, event planners are becoming increasingly resourceful in their approach to food and beverage. F&B is a large part of most annual meeting budgets, and the onsite gastronomic experience can greatly enhance — or detract from — the attendees' overall experience. A little imagination, combined with experience and hard work, can make your organization's next moveable feast one that will garner rave reviews. AC&F

Linda E. Schwartz, senior director, marketing and communication services for SmithBucklin, an association management company headquartered in Chicago, has worked with associations and their members for more than 30 years to develop, implement and manage a broad range of membership programs.