



Creating Meetings With Wellness In Mind

By Lisa Plummer Savas

Imagine you're an attendee sitting through a long morning of education at a three-day conference. You're trying your best to absorb all the great ideas and interesting bits of information being thrown at you from the stage, yet your energy is dropping. Fast. You're having a really hard time staying awake and engaged, and then something unexpected happens. Just as the presentation ends, an energetic woman in brightly colored workout clothing jumps on stage and Latin dance music fills the ballroom. She asks, "Are you ready to Zumba?"

A surprise 10-minute afternoon Zumba dance session is one example of a growing trend in meeting and event programming: healthier lifestyle features and activities designed to support attendee well-being. It doesn't have to be Zumba that snaps you out of a glassy-eyed stare at the projector screen to feel more awake and refreshed. Healthier food and snack options, outdoor group activities and free time, and morning fitness programs can be added to events to help attendees be more engaged, energized and able to retain more information.

"Just as technology has pushed the events industry to evolve, we are seeing an increasing demand for wellness activities and an overall awareness of creating a healthier attendee experience," says Jaime Nack, founder and president of Three Squares Inc., a sustainable event production and environmental consulting company. "Traveling to an event can be extremely taxing on all parties—attendees, speakers, exhibitors and event staff. The more we can do as event planners to ensure that attendees have healthy meal and fitness choices, agendas with down time, and meeting spaces with natural light and fresh air options, the more attendees will rave about their experience."

Here are some of the biggest wellness trends picking up steam at meetings and the activities that have made health and wellness an integral part of conference offerings.



TIP: Make It Fun

Incentivize attendee participation by incorporating wellness activities into a game or contest. For example, if your conference has a mobile app, give attendees points when they attend yoga sessions, step challenges or fun runs. Offer prizes and link games with social media so attendees can share what they're doing.

Healthier Food Options

As more people become educated about food—where it comes from and what they want to put in their bodies, for example—it only makes sense that healthier meal and snack options would gain more traction in the meetings landscape. A company well-versed in keeping up with trends, Gap Inc. has focused on wellness menu design at its three annual store manager conferences, says Julie Lindsey, the company's director of corporate events.

"Food is one of the things in attendee surveys that is most commonly commented on," says Lindsey. "If I'm going to focus on anything in meeting logistics, it's going to be food. We try to stay on top of what's going on in people's lifestyles, and we've definitely changed our practices." One big change, for example, is accommodating the rising number

of people with food allergies and special dietary preferences, she says. "The allergen aspect is the biggest thing that's happened lately with gluten-free and celiac disease," says Lindsey.

Putting healthy food options on a buffet table is one thing. Getting people to actually eat them is another. To encourage 1,300 attendees to try some of the healthier options at the 2012 Gap Store Manager Conference in Las Vegas, Lindsey and her team got creative. "On the breakfast or lunch buffets, we placed health cards with fun facts about different healthy ingredients near the items we were highlighting, such as oatmeal, blueberries and quinoa salad, with detailed nutrition facts about them," explains Lindsey.

Although brownies, cookies and potato chips may be cheaper options, healthier and more nourishing snack breaks between conference

sessions can make a big difference in attendee energy levels and information retention. High-protein breaks featuring sliced fruit, mixed nuts, yogurt, peanut butter and cheese have been incredibly popular with attendees, says Lindsey.

Dianne Budion-Devitt, a 20-year events professional, has made wellness an integral component of her work as an event strategist and speaker. "I love that food awareness is growing," she says. "I've always been an advocate. I was putting spinach in my buffets when people were looking at me like I was Popeye. We can't force anyone into a

lifestyle choice, that is not what we're here to do...but what we can do is design menus [and ask questions] based on the flow of the event. Where do we want to pick up energy? Do we serve protein? Where do we want to relax people? We can work with professional nutritionists and design fabulous menus and themed menus that keep the energy up."

Fitness Activities

Nothing helps people feel better and more alert than a little physical exercise. Emily Dredd, founder and CEO of Leading Well, a wellness solutions company, says physical activity not only keeps attendees' blood flowing, it also increases information retention and positive memories of an event experience.

"Several recent studies have shown that bursts of activity several times a day can be more beneficial than a concentrated gym workout after sitting all day," says Dredd. "Other research has found that sitting more than three hours at a time can boost the aging process. As this research becomes more mainstream, conference planners are becoming more and more eager to get people moving during all-day or extended-length events."



Whether first thing in the morning or between education sessions, yoga, movement and fitness classes held in conference spaces are becoming a more common sight as more organizations recognize how effective exercise can be in getting attendees energized, clear-headed and rejuvenated.

"We often do yoga classes in the morning so people can have a group activity before


TIP: Know Your Audience

Match wellness features and activities to your group demographic as well as to your destination. Get into the minds of your attendees and figure out what they'll want to do and what will energize them.


our breakfast and meetings kick off," says Lindsey. "Sometimes we're able to provide our own yoga instructors and do it internally, but more often we're partnering with a fitness center at a hotel." Lindsey says Gap events also incorporate Zumba breaks, smoothie stations and expanded fitness center hours for attendees.

Leveraging outdoor amenities for wellness activities in pool areas, golf courses and gardens can be a great option for some groups. From power walks and bike rides to hikes and fun runs for teambuilding or charity, organized outdoor activities allow attendees to work up a sweat and enjoy the scenery while building group camaraderie.

Taking wellness activities into the great outdoors has become a favorite practice for



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Kristen Roget, a senior meeting and event manager at Experient, who has helped more organizations integrate wellness into their programming in recent years. It's happening at her company's annual event, Experient e4, too.

Last year, e4 took place in Hawaii. Roget and her team posted a wellness chart with sunrise and sunset times. "At sunrise we had yoga on the beach," she says. "We also did Zumba. We did a fun-run-type event, and although we had an internal staff member help lead it, we also enlisted one of the hotel stewards who knew the property and the city and came up with running routes for us. He helped lead the group and offered little tidbits of what they were passing."

TIP: Provide Options

Some attendees may like the idea of group activities such as walking tours or bike rides, while others may want to work out on their own at the hotel fitness center. Give them choices. When it comes to food, be sure to balance wellness offerings with a few not-so-healthy choices to satisfy everyone.

Although fitness activities are wonderful options for attendees who want to have fun getting physical and keeping up their own regimes, some attendees may prefer more passive activities to help them unwind and recharge, such as chair massage and ergonomically designed lounge areas for resting weary feet and releasing tension. But there's one emerging wellness trend that

continues to disappear as planners try to cram as much into the daily schedule as possible: free time.

"We are learning more about attendee behavior and learning experiences," says Ashley Muntan, event marketing manager of Symantec Corporation. "They're going to learn and absorb more of what you're providing them if you give them downtime."



Cooking Up Wellness

A "Top Chef" dishes on the trends defining meetings.

If anyone knows about designing cuisine that supports health and well-being, it's Janine Falvo, executive chef of the Renaissance Atlanta Midtown Hotel and Briza, the property's hip, farm-to-table eatery. Whether she's creating mouth-watering fare for restaurant guests or customizing menus for groups, this award-winning chef is passionate about cooking with local, seasonal and artisanal ingredients. Here's what Falvo—who also gained notoriety as a ninth-season contestant on Bravo's "Top Chef: Texas"—has to say about the wellness food trend in meetings and events and why this health-conscious movement is here to stay.

What is your cooking philosophy when it comes to meetings?

I'm very much into giving groups the same type of experience as restaurant guests. There's nothing worse than going to a meeting and being served rubber chicken or something that's been sitting for hours.

What are some of the biggest trends you're seeing in health-oriented event cuisine?

In the past year and a half, we've really seen an increase in requests for special dietary menus, with gluten-free, vegetarian and vegan options being the biggest trends.

Have those trends made your job more complicated?

No, but I definitely think they're a great exercise in creativity. We don't want to make vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free have a different "feel" about them, and we don't want our guests to feel that they're having something special. It's just something else that we're offering. We want everybody to have a great experience regardless of their dietary issues, so it's about exercising our creativity as chefs and taking something that would be a side dish and making it the main piece of the plate.

What are some health-oriented dishes that have been the biggest hit with your meetings groups?

We've been doing a lot of grains recently...making a lot of quinoa salads and using farro quite a bit. Our black bean burgers are so popular that they're on the restaurant menu for lunch. We've been doing a lot of work with using tofu and grain or meatless meat products, so if an event has a Mexican theme, for example, we'll use a grain chorizo. We've also been doing a cauliflower steak, which is very popular, and cauliflower gratin and polenta. That's been big for us because you can make polenta taste extremely decadent and be completely vegan. We also do a roasted maitake mushroom on a truffle mashed potato. This mushroom has so

much umami, so much meaty flavor, you really don't realize you're not eating meat. Grains and lentils are increasing in popularity again. You can do a lentil fritter and flavor it in all kinds of different ways that are also healthy.

What about healthy snacks?

We follow a formula for snack breaks at events: sweet, salty and healthy treats. So we try to have something that's kind of decadent, something savory and something that's high-energy. For example we make [energy] bars in-house, we serve spiced and seasoned nuts, and we offer Greek yogurt parfaits in the morning with our house-made granola. We also offer agave nectar instead of sugars, and our local honeys are very popular.

For groups that want farm-to-table and organic, how do you work with planners to overcome the extra expense?

We try to be very upfront from the beginning. If they're choosing organic products or want a farm-to-table meal or experience for their entire event, there's a price associated with it. I work with a handful of really great local farms, ranchers and cheese makers...I don't use very many commodity items grown in commercial, industrial farms. So my prices are already established at the beginning, and a lot of the things that we're getting are organic already.

What tips would you give to planners when it comes to working with hotel and conference center chefs to design healthier meals?

State exactly what you want. For example, if you have vegetarians and you know they're finicky, be upfront and honest about it, and don't wait until your meeting is in progress to let us know. Know your audience, get to know the contacts you'll be using to create your meeting and have a set of standard questions so you can learn as much about the group as you possibly can. That will make all the difference in the planning phase and execution.

Is the healthy food trend simply a trend, or is it a new approach to food?

I don't see it going away. If you [offer] good, high-energy food and snacks, your attendees are going to get more out of [the meeting] and be more creative and engaged. People are educating themselves about food, so it's not like you can put whatever in front of them. With Food Network, "Top Chef" and Travel Channel, people are very aware of what they're eating and where their food comes from, which is great. So I think we're going to see a lot more specialized menus, because people pay top dollar to have a meeting, and they're demanding exactly what they want. I think that's only going to get more detailed as time goes on.

Give them an hour at the end of the day to go and process what they've learned."

Getting Buy-In

Enthusiasm for wellness programming depends on many factors, including group demographics. Instead of expecting throngs of people to show up at an inaugural 7 a.m. yoga class, have realistic expectations and understand that finding the right wellness fit for your group may be a case of trial and error, says Muntan.

"Worst-case scenario, if it's a flop, we won't do it again," says Muntan. "You're never going to succeed unless you take a risk. You also have to find the one activity that fits your venue or location," she advises. "Customize it to the venue and also the audience."

Few attendees will be thrilled with waking up bright and early for a power walk if they spent a few hours at a cocktail networking reception the previous night. Planners must make a point of meeting people where they are when it comes to fitness and lifestyle, says Nack. "You're not going to change people who want to stay out late and party into the night. If that's their vision of what their event experience is like and they're looking forward to blowing off some steam, then you

TIP: Make It Voluntary and Easy to Participate

Attendees should never be forced or feel shamed into participating in wellness programming, so always make it optional. Offer activities at a variety of times and in convenient locations so it's easier for attendees to opt-in rather than being forced to opt-out. Also, make sure exercise sessions are suitable for all levels so attendees feel safe, not intimidated.

want them to have that opportunity. As long as you make the more strenuous activities optional, like the hour morning yoga or walk, then you'll appeal to [some people], and you won't get any pushback from the others."

To encourage participation, leverage messaging and communication to let attendees know what you're doing, why it's important and how your wellness programming will benefit them. For example, if sustainability matters to your company and you'll be trying to cut down your carbon footprint by encouraging attendees to walk to the meeting venue rather than riding shuttle buses, offer pedometers and find fun, creative ways to incentivize their use, such as step challenges.

"The key to our success has been to make it easy for attendees to participate and to explain the benefits of participation in a wellness program,"

says Lindsey. "People naturally are interested and curious, so get into more detail to make sure something you're communicating is catching their eye. Your marketing and communication should hit a few different points so that something resonates with everyone in the audience."

Wellness activities can be fun and playful, and they offer an opportunity for nontraditional networking. "If someone feels comfortable and balanced when they attend an event, they're going to keep coming back, and they're going to talk about it in a positive note," says Budion-Devitt. "I do hope and I do believe that the trend in the next few years will be recognizing that we're not autotrons, and that we need time to play, to sit and absorb what we've learned, to sit and speak and talk to people, and that we need simple fun. It's designing events with people in mind—that's the key." ■

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