



Want Better Meetings? Serve Brain Food

by Harvey Chipkin

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Better choices in food can make a meeting far more productive, according to the chef at a major conference center and a psychologist who studies the effects of food on the brain.

Through the proper use of brain-stimulating food, meeting planners can create more productive meetings, according to research by Craig Mason, executive chef at The National Conference Center in Leesburg, Va., and Andrea Sullivan, an organizational psychologist.

Their research results along with advice for meeting planners have been published by the conference center in the paper, *The Science of Food for Thought: Enhancing Meetings Through Food*.

“Food will have a tremendous impact on a meeting’s productivity and outcome,” said Sullivan, who noted that research into food’s effects is still in its early stages.

In interviews with *Travel Market Report*, Sullivan and Mason described how to provide food at meetings that results in higher productivity and greater satisfaction for attendees.

The Psychologist’s Point of View

Sullivan, who runs a company called BrainStrength Systems and studies how to maximize brain potential in business settings, said she looks at “mental and physical energy and how food impacts neurotransmitters in the brain.”

Neurotransmitters “are the messenger chemicals that take messages across the neurons in the brain,” she explained. “Different foods have different effects on those neurotransmitters.”

A growing movement



Andrea Sullivan

Meeting planners “are just becoming aware of all this, but the movement is growing,” said Sullivan, who speaks about the topic at meetings.

“Planners have not realized the immediate effects of food. It’s not about whether you are going to live to 100 years old; it’s about staying awake for the next few hours. By serving the right foods, you get improvement in productivity right away.”

Sullivan went through a typical day of eating at conference and suggested better alternatives.

The sugar-rush breakfast

Even the seemingly benign continental breakfast of rolls, bagels and pastries “will create a brief sugar rush, followed by a crash a half-hour after breakfast – just as a meeting is starting,” Sullivan said. “It means a loss of focus for attendees.”

Simple carbohydrates such as white bread and pastries should be avoided, Sullivan advised.

Better breakfast options

Whole grain breads, yogurt and oatmeal are better choices. Also, hardboiled eggs, which contain choline, “a chemical building block to learning,” Sullivan said.

“It’s not hard. You just need to balance your menus. Eating protein slows down sugar absorption, and you don’t get the rush and the crash.”

Another no-no: energy bars. “They have no protein; it’s much better to serve fresh fruits and nuts.”

Lunchtime advice

“Be careful not to overload, because digestion takes a lot of resources. You need to offer light dishes [and] balance proteins and carbohydrates – a balance that affects the neurotransmitters.

“You want to create a chemical called tyrosine that helps us to be alert and stimulates the brain. You get it through seafood, chicken and lean meats – though not turkey. You need to have fresh salads, vegetables and whole grain rolls.

“The main thing that impacts whether the brain is stimulated or relaxed is the balance between carbohydrates and proteins,” she said.

Avoiding afternoon slowdowns

The afternoon food break – traditionally a time for ice cream pops and brownies – is the main culprit in brain slowdown, according to Sullivan.

“Afternoon breaks are the worst. People are already tired from sitting and not doing anything. Meetings use up your mental fuel, which you need to replace.”

Sullivan’s advice: Serve mini-quiches, cheese, healthy crackers and fruit at the afternoon break to replace that fuel.

Dinners that delight

The evening meal is “a whole other story,” Sullivan said. “You want people to feel satisfied, so you might have more carbohydrates than protein. You want to stimulate the chemical serotonin, which makes people feel satisfied and happy. You can serve red meats, turkey and a small dessert.”

The best brain foods will vary according to a meeting’s mission, Sullivan said. “If I were planning a teambuilding or social networking meeting, I might opt for more carbohydrates and more serotonin, so attendees get that satisfied feeling. The opposite would be true for a strategic meeting.”

The Chef’s Point of View

At the National Conference Center in Leesburg, executive chef Craig Mason and his colleagues have noticed “that by serving different foods, we got better responses from meeting attendees.”

“How many people sitting in a meeting at two in the afternoon are closing their eyes? Our goal is for everybody to have successful, productive meetings.”



Craig Mason

In debriefing sessions about the center’s menu changes, planners tell Mason that they see significant decreases in afternoon fatigue in attendees compared to earlier meetings at the conference center. The results were the same for first-time groups, when compared to their experiences at other properties.

Menu-planning for success

Mason tells planners that menus should be balanced. “You need to include apples, yogurt, pineapples and flaxseed. Of course, there will be an opportunity to indulge a little bit.”

That kind of planning allows meeting professionals to go back to their executives and tell them, “We’re set up for success at this meeting – by having the right space, the right technology and the right food,” Mason said.

Some attendees will notice the difference and some won’t. But, he said, “they will all realize that, for whatever reason, they are awake in the afternoon.”

Goodbye gummy bears; hello crudités

Breaks tend to be particularly damaging, Mason agreed. “Four or five years ago, we would have cookies, brownies and gummy bears at the afternoon break. Now, we may serve vegetable crudités, cheese and hardboiled eggs. For something sweet, we’ll have sugar-free mints.

“It’s important to be consistent with those breaks to avoid that afternoon fog.”

On the last day of a conference, said Mason, “we might throw in something sweeter when there’s

just a little time left. We want to be adaptable; the one important thing for us to provide is choice.

“Planners shouldn’t be nervous about these changes,” said Mason. “It’s still getting great, spa-like food – and they will have a much better meeting experience.”

Shopping and cooking advice

Buying food locally so that it retains its nutritional value, is important too, Mason said.

He also shared a cooking tip: “If you cook in a larger vessel with larger amounts of water, it cooks faster and leaves more nutrients in the food.”

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