



# Meals Not Included

By David M. Patt, CAE

## Meal time is business time for many associations.

Annual meetings, educational conferences, and other special events usually include breakfast, lunch or dinner as part of the registration fee, and often feature a keynote speaker as the **highlight of the program**.

Some organizations are changing the rules. The Association Forum of Chicagoland, for example, may offer a lunch-only option at some meetings, enabling busy executives and supplier members to network or be seen while grabbing a meal. Afterward, these folks can skip the educational and organizational sessions and slip back to the office.

This standard formula of meals with speakers, followed or preceded by breakout sessions, is familiar to most meeting-goers, but isn't always well-received.

"Lots of people don't like these functions," says Merle Hedland, owner of Bacon-Hedland Management, a meetings and conference planner for many associations. "You have to understand the customs of each industry."

For a variety of reasons, a surprisingly large number of trade associations, professional societies, and other organizations are now shunning the traditional sit-down-plated-meal-with-a-speaker format, choosing instead to offer options that appeal to their particular attendees.

## City Lights

"Members generally prefer to dine on their own in many of the fine restaurants in our host city," says Glenn Gatwirth, executive director, American Podiatric Medical Association.

In fact, that's the primary reason association meetings are held in attractive locales. Members want to experience the city they are visiting and not confine themselves to the hotel environs.

"Meeting attendees often like to walk out to a nearby restaurant, or even dine in a well-known hotel establishment," Hedland says. "We consider these options when evaluating cities and properties."



Convention and visitors bureaus often tout the unique aspects of the local cuisine when pitching meeting sites to associations, knowing it's a big selling point to the groups' members. Web sites, brochures, magazines and travel guides seduce meeting attendees with mouth-watering descriptions of restaurants and notable watering holes.

Some associations adopt a hybrid approach to meals. ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership provides buffet lunch and dinner stations during its annual meeting but leaves one evening free to give members the opportunity to explore the culinary delights of the local community on their own. Outings to late-night clubs and eateries often are available, but at an additional price.

Associations still may include meals in registration fees as part of a program, such as an awards presentation, membership recruitment pitch or the unveiling of a new initiative. Thematic events also may dictate use of plated meals or grazing buffets. In other situations, though, serving meals may be avoided simply for the sake of logistics.

## Too Many Moving Pieces

"It would be very difficult to feed 9,000 people on the trade show floor," says Mark Thorsby, senior director, client manage-





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ment, at SmithBucklin. "The lines would be too long, we might run out of food, and people would be very unhappy."

Instead, he arranges an abundance of concession stands in the exhibition hall and provides plenty of water for attendees of the International Car Wash Association show. Breakfast and heavy hors d'oeuvres are provided for smaller meetings and members-only events. This pattern is repeated elsewhere.

"At our annual meeting, we only provide a welcome party and one luncheon," says Ed Salek, CAE, executive director, Society of Tribologists and Lubrication Engineers. "They are on their own for the rest of the time."

Gatwirth, too, offers a limited meal option to podiatrists at their annual scientific meeting. "Included in the registration fee is access to a choice of at least two daily breakfast symposia, lunch in the exhibit hall, one dinner debate, and a major conference reception with food and beverages." Members are on their own for the rest of the time.

The American Library Association does not include meals in its conference registration fee. Some pre-conference sessions include meals for an additional fee.

The giant Radiological Society of North America, with 65,000 attendees, does not provide meals at its annual meeting.

## Who ordered that?

Delivery of meals usually is determined by the needs and interests of association members or meeting and conference attendees (as it should be).

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Scientific meetings frequently dispense with meals as members are most concerned about earning continuing education credits at workshops, symposia and practicums. They'd rather complete their business and then take advantage of social time on their own.

Organizations offering one-day events, though, may stick with the traditional format.

"Our experience is that the people who come to our events are extremely busy," says Jerry Stermer, president, Voices for Illinois Children. "So it is almost a rule of thumb that you include a meal as part of any event."

## Sticker Shock

"Most attendees pay out of pocket," says Jean Knaack, executive director, Road Runners Club of America (RRCA), which hosted its 50<sup>th</sup> annual convention in Chicago this year. "They

don't have big corporate travel and convention budgets." RRCA charges separately for each meal.

"Some people just really don't want to eat hotel catered lunches when they can grab a \$6 meal," Knaack adds. She reports that luncheons are well attended, despite costing extra. "Building meals into the registration cost makes it seem very expensive. When people see it broken out, they don't get sticker shock for some reason."

The National Storytelling Network does not include meals, allowing registration fees to be a bit more reasonable for its lower-earning membership. Only when it held its meeting at an isolated location was dinner provided — meal tickets were distributed to attendees for credit at the restaurant in the hotel lobby.

The Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children charges separately for meals, even when a keynote speaker is on the agenda. Many meeting attendees receive limited stipends from their employers and are personally responsible for any expenses over budget. As a result, they often seek meals at nearby restaurants or fast food franchises and forgo the extra fee for a hotel meal.

Economics may still be a factor even when members aren't as financially pinched. "We charge a remarkably low registration fee," Gatwirth says, "because we believe that continuing medical education is a vitally important and essential member benefit. Members are pleased with the value they receive and welcome the freedom to explore dining choices on their own. They appreciate the association finding ways to cut meeting costs, too."

## Making it Work

"Associations without meal events often cannot meet the catering requirements of some properties," Hedland says. "You must go somewhere you're wanted."

He suggests working with convention and visitors bureaus to identify venues that are compatible with the association's operations. In some cases, suppliers' hospitality suites can help meet the threshold for hotel catering revenue. In any event, he reminds planners to "treat attendees well."

That includes leaving plenty of time for people to walk or ride to a restaurant, wait to be seated, eat without being rushed, and return to the meeting location in time to attend scheduled sessions.

Whatever model the association follows for its meeting, though, meal time probably will still be business time. The meal just won't be served at the meeting. ■

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David Patt may be reached at [dmpattcae@aol.com](mailto:dmpattcae@aol.com).