



Good Health is Good for Business: Boost Productivity by Providing Healthy Meals at Conferences and Events

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

Imagine you are the presenter of an afternoon wellness seminar at a conference just after what was described in the event brochure as the sugar-fix break. The smorgasbord full of treats served at the break has left people dozy and unable to concentrate – an inevitable carb-coma state, since simple carbohydrate sugars spike in the blood stream quickly and then fall abruptly.

Then imagine you are hired as a nutrition speaker for a different company's health and safety meeting that included an unhealthy lunch: greasy lasagna, goopy caesar salad and butter-drenched white garlic toast, rounded off with a platter of Nanaimo bars and cans of pop.

As a wellness and productivity speaker, both of the above scenarios have happened to me and left me, as well as many attendees, confused about the mixed message. Corporate groups, associations and government groups hire wellness experts to inspire their team to take personal responsibility for their health, yet sometimes fail to walk the talk by taking the same responsibility.

Before you plan your company's next corporate wellness meeting, conference or event, here are some things to keep in mind.

Healthy meals boost productivity

To maximize attendee energy and provide healthy options for full day conferences and events, consider these best practices:

Continental breakfast: Skip pastries and request all breads be whole grain, rye and multi-grain. Be careful not to solely offer muffins and bagels, since these foods don't have enough protein, and attendees will get sleepy. Add a source of protein such as peanut butter, nuts, yogurt cups, cottage cheese, cheese cubes or hard-cooked eggs. Serve fresh fruit trays, coffee, tea, water and un-sweetened juices.

Hot breakfast: If you are offering a hot breakfast, go for whole grain toast or whole wheat pancakes with scrambled eggs or a vegetable and cheese egg frittata. Round out the meal with oatmeal, fresh fruit salad, yogurt, bran cereal, coffee, tea, water and unsweetened juices.

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Cold lunch: If you are bored with standard wraps and sandwiches, consider a salad bar. Serve bowls of spinach, mixed greens and vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, red peppers and grated carrots. Serve chicken, shrimp and beef in cubes or on skewers. Include alternative protein sources such as chickpeas, cheese cubes, grated feta, pump-kid seeds and slivered almonds. Serve several types of vinaigrette salad dressings and don't forget to include whole grain buns and bread for some complex carbohydrates for brain fuel. For dessert, serve small bowls of fruit crisp.

Hot lunch: Offer a buffet of dark green mixed salad greens, whole grain buns, seasonal mixed vegetables, chicken or beef entree with limited added fat, and rice or oven roasted yams and potatoes prepared with a small amount of oil. For vegetarians, offer vegetable lasagna, lentil curry or tofu stir-fry. For dessert, serve chocolate dipped strawberries and a fruit tray.

Coffee breaks: Serve more than just coffee and tea, since attendees need energy to get the most out of your event. Save on cost and improve nutrition by offering jugs of water and skipping pop.

Best healthy snack attacks

- Sliced fruit tray and cheese cube tray
- Yogurt parfaits (yogurt, berries and granola)
- Whole grain crackers and cheese platter
- Bruschetta on whole wheat baguette with cheese
- Devilled eggs and raw veggies and dip
- Whole-wheat pita bread wedges and hummus
- Trail mix or individual bowls of nuts and dried fruit
- Snack-size unsweetened fruit and yogurt smoothies
- Shrimp with cocktail dipping sauce and whole grain crackers
- Mini bran or oatmeal muffins, yogurt cups and fresh fruit salad cups
- Mini skewers of satay chicken, beef or shrimp, and veggies and dip
- Regular or decaf lattes, tea lattes and a bowl of fresh fruit

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Why invest in wellness?

When employers invest in wellness they can expect a direct return on investment through boosted morale, increased productivity, reduced absenteeism and lower medical costs.

For sales teams, executives and managers, there are added benefits: positive changes in confidence come when you gain control of your health and lose excess weight. If you look and feel your best, this can help you lead, sell and negotiate better.

For administrative teams, having better energy and health means you'll have the resiliency to keep up with the relentless multi-tasking your job demands. Administrative teams are the heart of keeping a company running, and are often the first impression for clients in any business. Investing in wellness can help administrators project the positive energy and vitality every company wants. Good health is indeed good for business.

Andrea Holwegner, known as the Chocoholic Dietitian, is founder and president of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting Inc., a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers and a media expert for the Dietitians of Canada. For nutrition counselling information and to sign up for a free monthly newsletter loaded with nutrition tips, recipes and more visit www.healthstandnutrition.com. Twitter @chocoholicRD.

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