

Meetings at Hotels and Convention Centers: Healthy Options Not the Norm

Introduction

The workplace food environment, including the food served at meetings, influences employees' ability to eat healthfully. Creating a culture of health and wellness in meetings and conferences is an important way to help people eat well and be physically active, while also reducing health care costs and absenteeism and increasing productivity. Convention centers and hotels are common venues in which organizations host meetings and conferences. These venues usually provide food and beverage service for meetings, serving millions of people each year. In this brief, we describe information gathered about catering services for meetings at the nation's largest hotels and convention centers, identify which venues offer "healthy" options or meeting packages, and assess the nutrition criteria for those offerings.



Methods

We collected catering menus from a sample of venues in June and July of 2016, including the convention centers in the 25 largest U.S. cities and 70 hotel properties. For each of the major U.S. hotel corporations, we identified the most recognized brand (e.g. from Starwood Hotels, we chose the Sheraton brand). We analyzed the menu from one property from each top brand in the ten most populous cities in the U.S. Of the eight largest hotel companies, only Best Western was excluded because its properties typically do not provide food service or meeting spaces. Most menus were available online; if not, we obtained them from the venue's sales office. For each venue, we reviewed any menu items identified or promoted as "healthy" and noted other relevant trends among food service offerings for meetings at these locations.

Results

The majority of top hotels and convention centers offer one or more "healthy" items:

- 64% convention centers (16/25)
- 100% Hyatt locations (10/10)
- 90% Hilton locations (9/10)
- 70% Marriott locations (7/10)
- 70% Holiday Inn locations (7/10)
- 60% Sheraton locations (6/10)
- 50% Radisson locations (5/10)
- 40% Wyndham locations (4/10)

“Healthy” Menu Trends

Most convention centers and hotels offered menus with one or two items identified as “healthy,” although the terminology varied (e.g. “Stay Fit,” “Spa,” etc.). The most common eating occasions with a “healthy” option were breakfast buffets and break snack packages. Hyatt hotels typically offered the greatest number of “healthy” items at each location compared to other hotel chains.

Almost none of the “healthy” menu options were based on specific nutrition criteria. It was not possible to fully assess the nutritional value of menu items because no venues provided portion size or nutrition information, such as sodium, saturated fat, and sugar content. Even in the absence of specific nutrition information, it was clear that many “healthy” meal options would not meet criteria such as the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity healthy meeting guidelines (www.healthymeeting.org). For example, some meals labeled as “healthy” included traditional desserts or pastries, which were likely high in calories, fat, or sugars.



General Meeting Food Service Trends

We found that food service at major hotels was not standardized at the corporate level. Rather, the menu offerings differed at each convention center or hotel property. Within each property, default menus were typically advertised as a starting point, and chefs were willing to customize them based on meeting organizers’ requests. Most venues already highlighted alternatives for guests with one or more dietary restrictions, such as vegetarian, vegan, or gluten-free options.



We identified some healthful practices that were not explicitly promoted as “healthy.” Soft drinks were overwhelmingly *not* included in the price of buffet and plated meals; instead, usually coffee and tea (and juice at breakfast) were the only beverages included. Fruits or vegetables were included with most every meal, although portion sizes were unclear.

We also observed widespread unhealthful trends. Dessert was almost universally included with lunch and dinner, while fruit was almost never among choices for the dessert course. Salads were often adorned with creamy dressings, cheese, candied nuts, or croutons or tortilla strips. There were few healthful hors d’oeuvres choices on reception menus.

Recommendations

Hotels and convention centers are making some modest efforts to provide healthier food choices for meetings, but healthy meetings are the exception, not the norm. Although many caterers are willing to accommodate client's health concerns, most meeting planners do not have the expertise to customize a menu to meet nutrition criteria. Hotels and convention centers should make healthy options available for every eating occasion—breakfast, lunch, dinner, breaks, receptions as standard menu options provided to meeting planners. All options designated as healthy should be based on clear and publicly available nutrition criteria. While caterers have a lot of potential to make healthy meetings more accessible, organizations planning meetings at these venues can also play a role in driving demand for healthy food service. Planning healthy meetings and events will require working both with venues, which can make healthy options available in their standard menus, and with meeting planners to ensure that those options are selected and made available to employees and participants.



For more information, contact nutritionpolicy@cspinet.org or visit www.healthymeeting.org.