

# Recipe for Success

Because food and beverage play such a crucial role in creating the right experience for your attendees, it's never too early to begin food planning. While it might look easy on *The Food Network*, there are myriad variables to consider before you can begin planning banquet menus.

## Group Profile

Just as you consider your audience when planning educational programs, you must carefully consider your attendees and their needs when developing food and beverage plans. Within a corporation, you might plan a national meeting for store managers from around the country, including smaller cities and rural areas, or you might plan an incentive trip for the top-producing salespeople from North America and Europe. Within an association, you might organize an event for the board of directors or a group of student volunteers. Even though everyone is from the same company or works in the same industry, there are differences that determine what types of menus may or may not be appropriate.

Younger attendees may eat healthier foods, but they're also more likely to enjoy junk food or more casual fare. Older delegates may not want anything too exotic, spicy or heavy. Women might not mind being served chicken, fish or a salad entrée, but some men might not be satisfied unless there's a piece of beef on their plate. Other factors that can help you predict the types of foods that may be acceptable to a particular group include: occupation, socioeconomic status, ethnic background and geographic area. One thing's for certain: All attendees have become more sophisticated and demanding about their food choices.

In addition, food allergies and special menu requests are increasing, so find out as much as you can in advance about attendee needs and preferences. After the low-carb craze of the past few years, a number of attendees continue to avoid carbohydrates and other foods that are excluded from popular diets. It's best to study the history of your group to determine whether such diets are a factor. If you aren't sure, test the group on the first day of your meeting and make changes for the following days based on response.

At a recent meeting for 6,000 people, Experient planners had "carb watchers" in mind when they added a cheese tray and a big bowl of hard-boiled eggs to the Continental breakfast buffet. The planner ordered 500 eggs for the first day and 300 for day two. After the eggs were completely gone on day one, she increased the order for day two. (See sidebar on page 12 for more ideas about how to effectively deal with special requests.)

## Menu Planning

In addition to the profile of your group, a number of other considerations should be included in planning your menus. When making decisions about what types of food and beverage will be served, remember the following.

- **Scheduling.** Take into account what your delegates will be doing immediately before and after the meal. If they're coming from a function at which heavy hors d'oeuvres were served, the meal should be lighter. If they're coming from a liquor-only reception, the meal should be heavier.
- **Ease of production.** Certain delicate items like lobster can't be produced and served in large quantities without sacrificing quality. Chicken and beef, on the other hand, are banquet staples for good reasons. They're easy to prepare, can be cooked a variety of ways and are palatable to most people. Beef also has the advantage of being consistently available in a wide range of cuts.

- **Labor costs.** Since payroll costs can account for as much as one-third of a meal function's total price, it makes sense to steer clear of items that require a lot of time and/or many pairs of hands to prepare. For example, you may not want to order anything that's stuffed, wrapped in puff pastry or baked in parchment. Elaborate vegetable garnishes and sauces painted on plates fall into the same category. However, more and more food items are outsourced or purchased from vendors who specialize and produce mass quantities that they can sell to numerous facilities. While this may offset the facility's labor cost, it will increase the food cost of the item.

- **Product shelf life.** Since programs don't always run on time, it makes sense to order items that will hold up well if service is delayed. Foods that will remain moist and flavorful despite service delays include chicken, filet mignon, medallions of beef, roasted potatoes, rice, green beans and steamed carrots. Items that won't hold up as well include eggs Benedict, any food served en croute and pre-sliced beef items.

- **Traffic flow.** Some foods hold up well but can cause major traffic flow headaches. Deli buffets for large groups, for example, are notorious for becoming jammed up as attendees attempt to create the perfect sandwich from a choice of seven meats, five cheeses, four breads and two mustards. An alternative is to serve pre-made sandwiches cut in half so that people can still have a choice but the lines move faster. Fajita stations and nacho bars may also add time for the attendees to prepare. Also, remember that the more food choices offered on a buffet, the slower the line will move.

- **Repetition.** When planning menus for a multi-day meeting, be sure to pay attention to what is being served at other events held during your convention such as accompanying person tours, exhibitor-sponsored functions and hospitality suites. You wouldn't want your guests to eat cheesecake at an exhibitor-sponsored function, again on a spouse tour and then again at the final-night dinner. Similarly, it's important to avoid repetition within any given meal, as in sautéed carrots, carrot and raisin salad, and carrot cake. Sometimes, however, repetition can be good. If you have one special event each year—the gala awards dinner, for example—attendees may expect the same filet mignon each year. Then again, they may want something different—chocolate dessert one year, crème brûlée the next. That's why it's so critical to know your group.

- **Political sensitivities.** While it's fairly obvious that you wouldn't serve Pepsi at a Coca-Cola convention, the licensing agreements for companies like Burger King require that certain drink products be served at their events. It's your responsibility as the meeting planner to find out about all of the subsidiaries, licensing issues and political sensitivities of your organization and plan accordingly.





- **Regional/house specialties.** More often than not, attendees appreciate the opportunity to sample some of the signature dishes of the destination. That might mean fajitas in San Antonio, crab cakes in Baltimore or cheesesteaks in Philadelphia. Individual properties also may have a standout specialty of the house that you wouldn't want to miss.
- **Variety.** There are many ways to vary meals so that delegates don't have the same experience over and over during the course of the convention:
  - **Style of service.** Think beyond the traditional American-style plated meal. Other options include lazy Susans, family-style, buffet, French service, Russian service, cafeteria-style, action stations, preset courses, box lunches and butler-passed hors d'oeuvres. (See sidebar on page 15 for definitions of food-service styles.)
  - **Entrée selection.** Consider dual entrées (beef and shrimp), salad entrées (chicken Caesar), sandwiches and wraps, in addition to the usual beef, chicken, fish and pasta.
  - **Vegetables and starches.** Potatoes can be fried, baked, boiled, roasted, mashed or twice-baked. Choices for rice include white, brown, wild, long-grain, pilaf, risotto, jasmine and basmati. Pasta comes in many shapes and sizes. As for vegetables, if you agree to go with "Chef's selection of seasonal vegetables," make sure he or she doesn't repeat it during your stay.
  - **Beverages.** In addition to the standard coffee, tea and soft drinks, you can serve lemonade, iced tea, unique juice blends or bottled water. At receptions, think about drinks with local flair such as margaritas or sangria, microbrews or local wines, mojitos or hurricanes.
  - **Coffee breaks and Continental breakfasts.** Each day, vary the breads (whole wheat, whole grain, sourdough, muffins, sweet breads), juices (orange, grapefruit, apple, cranberry) and fruit (whole fruit, slices, cubes, kebabs). It's also a good idea to upgrade to a breakfast sandwich one day.
  - **Menu balance.** The appetite is stimulated by all of the senses, so it's important to try to balance flavors (sweet, tart, salty, sour, bland), colors (aim for contrast), textures (crispy, chewy, soft, firm), shapes and sizes (flat, round, long, short, shredded, chopped), temperatures (hot soup, cold salad, salad entrée, warm dessert) and preparation methods (sautéed, grilled, broiled, roasted, steamed).

When it's time to sit down with the catering manager and actually plan the menus, start with your most important—and probably most expensive—events, such as the opening reception, closing dinner or awards luncheon. If you decide to do a Tex-Mex welcome reception, that eliminates Tex-Mex for lunch. If you want to do a four-course final dinner with a salmon entrée, that eliminates fish for lunch.

## Negotiation

Food and beverage negotiations should begin at the contract stage; waiting until six months or a year out will leave you with little to no bargaining leverage. The first step is to gather all your facts and figures. Using post-convention reports, calculate exactly how much your meeting is worth to the hotel in terms of food and beverage revenue.

Don't forget to include "hidden" revenues from affiliated groups, hospitality suites, individual room service, exhibit floor concessions and on-site restaurants and lounges.

Next, draft a list of your priorities. Although everything is technically negotiable, it makes sense to determine what you absolutely must have and what you can live without—because chances are, you won't get everything you ask for. Keep in mind the following guidelines.

- **Ask for a copy of the facility's policies and procedures.** Facilities frequently change policies, and if you aren't aware of the current ones, you can't negotiate as successfully. Even worse, you may get stuck with extra charges you didn't expect. For instance, some hotels charge extra for seating during a Continental breakfast—and if that charge is included in the property's policies and procedures and isn't negotiated in your contract, you'll have to pay it.

### Get Special-Request Savvy

Special requests for those with food allergies or dietary restrictions are on the rise. Here's how to ensure that your attendees with special requests will have a positive dining experience at your meeting.

- **Ask for information.** Your meeting registration forms should include fields for attendees to check whether they need vegetarian or kosher meals or have food allergies. Ask those with food allergies to list which foods they must avoid. Find out this information in advance so that you can work with your catering professionals to determine how best to serve the attendees with special needs. For instance, the chef will probably need to prepare separate meals for those with dairy allergies, as most menus will include some forms of dairy.
- **Label foods.** Attendees who are allergic to shellfish or nuts and other common allergens can usually just avoid foods containing these items. Help them do so by requesting that the facility label all foods on a buffet, including a list of ingredients, and place a printed menu on each table for plated events.
- **Educate servers.** Encourage the facility to let all servers know which ingredients are included in the foods they serve, especially if the foods include common allergens. When attendees ask, the server will be able to provide an answer rather than returning to the kitchen to ask someone else.

- **Establish cost parameters.** If you're booking five years out, you can't expect to negotiate menu prices at the time the contract is signed. But you can expect to establish cost parameters before signing on the dotted line. You may, for example, negotiate a fixed percentage off the printed menu prices in effect six months before the meeting date. Another technique is to negotiate to have the previous year's prices apply to your meeting. (Just remember to collect the menus a year in advance so you'll have these prices.) Or you could attach the current banquet menus to the contract and negotiate that the prices won't increase by more than a certain percentage each year (perhaps 5 percent or the Consumer Price Index, whichever is smaller). Catering managers usually don't like to establish firm menu prices until six months out, but you may be able to negotiate them as much as 12 months out by agreeing on a percentage ceiling above the current prices. If it turns out that prices drop in the interim, you can cover yourself by stipulating in the contract that you will pay whichever is less—current costs or the ceiling price you established.

- **Consider menu flexibility.** If the menu prices don't meet your budget, work with the chef to design menus in your price range. You may even be able to choose the same menu as another in-house group and thereby save the hotel time and money by not having to create an entirely different preparation. (If you do this, be sure to schedule your dinner to start just before the other group's dinner so that your function won't be affected if the kitchen runs out of food.) If you can commit to specific menus more than six months out for your larger, more expensive meals, the hotel may be willing to negotiate a discount off the prices. Knowing menus and tentative numbers far in advance can help a hotel in budgeting/forecasting and ultimately ordering.

- **Don't be afraid to ask for complimentary items.** While the days of complimentary receptions are pretty much over, you still may be able to negotiate a relatively low-cost comp or two. If your group is hosting a large or lavish dinner, for example, ask the hotel to

## Taking F&B International

Meetings and events are becoming more global. Not only are more North American meetings including international guests, but many North American-based groups are holding meetings overseas. As your attendee profile changes to include more international guests, so should your menu. Start by sharing your attendee mix with several hotels and the convention bureau and ask them for sample menus of what they have done in the past for similar groups. By looking through several menus, you'll probably see common threads among them that will lead you to make the right choices. In addition, if your meeting has an active local host committee, definitely get them involved.

Not only should you seek help from others, it's important to keep the following guidelines in mind.

- **Include ethnic food when you have a large contingent of international attendees at a U.S. conference.** However, if there are only a small number of international attendees registered, plan only for vegetarian and kosher requests. More events of all kinds are beginning to include sushi side dishes and fusion Chinese that is acceptable to all attendees.
- **Keep in mind that international visitors expect to be eating “American” food.** Most visitors to a foreign country will plan to enjoy local cuisine during their visit. This is especially true in the United States, as U.S. food is popular in many parts of the world. For instance, very few Chinese ate cheese until McDonald's and Burger King became popular in China; now it's much more acceptable to serve cheese to Asian guests.
- **Variety is crucial.** People will select what they like or stay away from what they want to avoid, so the key is to have a variety of foods. If your event has a large percentage of international attendees, offer buffet-style meals. Always include some vegetarian, or noodle-based vegetarian, dishes. A cheese board is always acceptable to Europeans and Americans.
- **When in Asia, still serve Western.** If you're holding a meeting in Asia but a majority of attendees are American or European, offer 40 percent Asian fusion or non-objectionable Asian dishes and 60 percent Western food. Your catering manager in Hong Kong, Singapore or Japan will know exactly what to offer.
- **When in Europe, get sophisticated.** Cuisine for meetings in Europe should be cosmopolitan and reflect a leaning toward French and Italian fusion. Those ethnic dishes are acceptable to all Europeans.

provide complimentary hors d'oeuvres, a glass of wine, a dessert or perhaps an upgrade of one of your courses. Other comps to consider negotiating include: a Continental breakfast for your board meeting, a reception or dinner for the executive board, complimentary or discounted staff meals, decorative items, one complimentary meal for every 50 to 75 covers or a credit to your master account based on a fixed percentage of your total food and beverage revenue.

- **Negotiate for agreeable guarantees and oversets.** Most hotels have increased their guarantee deadline from 48 hours to 72 hours, meaning that you need to give the catering manager a final head count for all of your food and beverage functions three days before they're scheduled to take place. If you're ordering standard food and beverage items that are offered in the hotel restaurants, for example, the property may agree to a 48-hour guarantee. Or if you are having a ticket exchange for your final banquet, you may be able to negotiate a 24- or 48-hour guarantee just for this single event, thus allowing time to sell additional tickets.

Most hotels also have decreased oversight from 10 percent to 5 percent (or even 3 percent), meaning the property will set up seating for 5 percent more than the guaranteed number of guests at any given food and beverage function. For groups of more than 1,000, however, most hotels cap the number of extra seats at 50. Depending on the menu and style of service, you may be able to negotiate a higher oversight percentage. You may be able to negotiate 10 percent on a standard buffet or Continental breakfast, for example, but you probably won't be able to make that kind of a deal for a custom-designed menu at a formal sit-down dinner. Note that the term “overset” typically refers to the setup of extra tables and chairs. It doesn't necessarily mean that the hotel will be prepared to serve food to the additional



people who might show up. So unless you specify in the contract (and remind the catering manager) that the hotel will not only set the extra places, but also be prepared to serve, some of your guests might be left waiting for their meals—or find themselves eating a meal that’s different than everyone else’s.

- **Be specific about service ratios.** Payroll costs can account for as much as one-third or more of a meal function’s total price. Consequently, some hotels are reducing the number of servers at group events. So be sure to negotiate service ratios and spell them out in your contract. For a sit-down or plated meal, there should be at least one waiter for every 25 guests at breakfast and one for every 20 at lunch and dinner. For a buffet meal, the preferred ratio is one to 40 for breakfast and one to 30 for lunch and dinner. Specify that there will be no extra labor or service charges for these ratios. If the menu is higher priced or has many courses, you want a higher level of service. Try to negotiate a service ratio of two waitstaff for every three tables. When wine is being served, you must have more servers; two waitstaff for every three tables will work. Since you will spend more by adding wine or extra courses, don’t pay extra for better service ratios.

Many properties apply a flat service charge to meal functions under a certain size (typically 25 people). Whether your meeting is large or small, it always makes sense to ask for the service charges, labor charges and/or bartender fees to be waived altogether; to be waived for meals where you are ordering the same food for numerous smaller functions occurring at the same time; or to be based on the total dollar amount spent on the function. If your group is large in number and bars are fully hosted, do not pay bartender fees.

Finally, be sure all of the specifics that you negotiate with the catering manager are spelled out in your contract. Remember: If you don’t get it in writing, you may not get it at all. (See sidebar on facing page for more information about how food and beverage agreements should look in a contract.)

## Guarantees

For every food and beverage event you plan, you’ll have to provide the facility with a guarantee, which is the minimum number of people for which you will pay. If more than your guaranteed number of attendees show up, you’ll be charged for the extra people; if fewer people join you, you still have to pay for the guaranteed number because the facility will have prepared enough food for that many. While it may seem like a guessing game, establishing guarantees is really a matter of statistical analysis—a thorough, competent analysis of historical data combined with current conditions. The following tips can help you through the process.

- **Analyze your history.** When studying the history of your meeting, examine patterns of preregistrations, local ticket sales, arrival/departure patterns, number of cancellations, number of no-shows, number of attendees, guarantees, excess over guarantees and the percentage of total attendees at a

## Food-Service Styles

**American service:** Food is plated in the kitchen, with the sauce possibly passed.

**French service:** Platters of food (entrée, starch and vegetables) are prepared in kitchen. Servers, using serving utensils, place food on guests’ plates. Each item is served separately.

**Russian service:** All courses are either served from platters or an escoffier dish. Tureens are used for soup and special bowls for salads. Waiters bring platters to the table, and guests serve themselves from platters.

**Hand service:** One waiter for every two guests. Every person in the room is served at the same time. This is especially impressive if using domed covers, since all are removed at once.

**Buffet:** All food is placed in chafing dishes or platters on tables. Guests serve themselves. Beverages may or may not be served at individual round tables.

**Family-style or English service:** Platters and bowls are placed in the center of the round table, and guests help themselves and pass food to one another. A lazy Susan can also be used for this type of service. Great for increasing networking and communication at the table.

**Butler service:** Waitstaff passes hors d’oeuvres on silver trays. Waiters wear gloves upon request.

**Preset service:** One or more courses are set on tables prior to guests’ arrival. These courses are usually salads or cold/room temperature desserts. Saves time on service.

**Cafeteria service:** Guests pass through a serving line, and waitstaff serves food onto their plates.

**Box lunches:** Individual meals are placed in individual containers. This is often used in exhibit halls and for recreational activities.

**Choice of entrées:** Guests are offered a choice of entrée in advance, with some sort of ticket or indicator to their entrée selection. Choice is usually limited to two or three options.

**Action stations:** Chefs prepare or carve food to order in the room where the event is held. This can include a pasta station, stir-fry or crepe station, etc.

**Waiter parade:** Waiters bring food (usually dessert) into the rooms all at one time, possibly all parading down the center of the room before splitting off to specific rounds.

**Mixing service styles:** For instance, serve preset salads, American-style entrées and buffet desserts. Use your imagination.



## Doing the Math

Analyzing preregistration numbers is one way to get a handle on initial meal guarantees. Experient recommends the following method.

To use this method, you need at least one year's past history, including what was guaranteed versus what was actually served for each function, plus the preregistration total for that particular year as of the day the guarantees were determined. To get accurate histories of actual meals consumed, you need to count each empty place setting before the completion of each meal. Never rely on the count from your catering manager.

For each function, figure the percentage of preregistrants that were actually served at the function by dividing the total number of covers served by the preregistration total.

### EXAMPLE 1:

The 2006 preregistration count for ABC group was 900 as of the day the guarantees were determined.

Function	No. served	% of pre-registration
Lunch — Day 1	810	90% (810/900)
Lunch — Day 2	720	80% (720/900)

How to use this information to set the guarantees for your current meeting:

- Determine the total number of preregistrants as of the day the initial guarantees are figured.
- Multiply the preregistration figure by the above percentages to establish the current year's projected attendance for each function.
- Based upon the hotel's overset policy (usually 3 percent to 5 percent, but many facilities max at 50 overset seats for larger parties), back off the numbers conservatively (somewhere within the overset percentage) to allow for flexibility and eliminate potential waste.

### EXAMPLE 2:

The 2007 preregistration for ABC group is 950. The hotel overset is 5 percent. With only one year of history to rely on, we were a bit cautious and established our guarantees based on a 2.5 percent reduction of the projected attendance (half the overset percentage). To come up with the maximum number set, we multiplied the guarantees by the overset percentage—5 percent.

Function	Projected covers	No. guaranteed / No. set
Lunch — Day 1	855 (90% of 950)	834 (855 - 2.5%) / 876 (834 + 5%)
Lunch — Day 2	760 (80% of 950)	741 (760 - 2.5%) / 778 (741 + 5%)

## EXPERIENCE THIS

### A SPECIAL REQUEST PUZZLE

**E**xperient meeting planners made a successful trip through the maze of special requests while planning food and beverage for a recent corporate meeting with an estimated attendance of 18,000, many of whom were international attendees. The meeting planner and client developed a detailed specialty meal requests policy, determining which types of requests would be considered and which ones would be incorporated into the general attendee meals.

The client allowed for a number of special requests such as halal, kosher and Indian. Kosher breakfast was served each day outside the special prayer service room in the hotel. Two types of Indian food were served: Hindu Indian, which is vegetarian, and Indian, which includes chicken. In addition, there were a number of Atkins, South Beach and the Zone dieters. To accommodate their needs, breakfast included hard-boiled eggs and meat platter options. In addition, there was one request for pureed food for an attendee recovering from dental surgery. Room service was called into duty to assist this attendee.

Over a six-day period, attendees dined at two receptions, five breakfasts, five lunches, 15 breaks and one closing banquet. The goal was to keep food and beverage offerings consistent across five hotels without repeating meal offerings. During the event, attendees dined on barbecue, action/carving stations, Thai, Chinese, Mexican, American comfort food, “California Marketplace” and French fusion. All meals were buffet with lunch and dinner options including a chicken, beef and fish entrée. Each meal included vegetarian options, and all the food offerings were labeled for attendees with food allergies and international attendees who might not have been familiar with some of the cuisine.

particular meal function. Look back at several years in order to obtain the most accurate picture. (See facing page for a formula to help you analyze preregistration numbers.)

- **Consider current conditions.** When you have a handle on the statistical history of the meeting, examine how current conditions could affect attendance at meal functions. Consider variables such as location, extra bodies (exhibitors, speakers, spouses, staff), local attendance, changes in program format and scheduling.

- **Err lower rather than higher.** Keep in mind that while guarantees, once given to the hotel, can never be decreased, they can almost always be increased within a reasonable period of time. Experient recommends making any changes to the guarantee no less than 24 hours in advance.

- **Weigh the risks.** The ultimate objective of the function should determine how much risk you are willing to take on guarantees. Under-guaranteeing a function, for instance, could create a negative impression due to delays in service. Saving money may not be as important as flawless service.

- **Consider a soft guarantee for multi-day events.** When you have to give guarantees for more than one day, an effective tactic is to moderately undercut the second day’s guarantee. The objective is to buy some time to see attendance at the previous day’s function before giving a final guarantee for the next day. However, first discuss this with the catering manager to make sure he is comfortable with a soft guarantee and to determine how flexible he can be in terms of in-

creasing the guarantee within 24 hours. Most facilities will work with you when you communicate openly and honestly.

- **Be flexible.** If you need a very large increase at the last minute, and your menu includes items that the hotel normally doesn’t have in stock, you may not be able to serve the same meal to everyone. You may, for example, need to vary the entrée and dessert. If such a situation arises, instruct the waiters to serve the alternate items to entire tables in one section of the room—preferably to staff sitting at tables that aren’t in the center of the room. Be aware that the hotel may not be able to secure the extra banquet staff to meet your negotiated service ratio.
- **Communicate openly with the catering staff.** Make sure you know the guarantee policy as it is applied considering the weekend. When are Sunday and Tuesday guarantees due? And if you think you may come in over your guarantee, request the hotel to overset additional tables with reserved signs.



# Breakfast

You can help attendees get a strong start to your meeting with a nutritional breakfast. However, it's important to keep in mind that, in most cases, planners will have to contend with a considerable no-show factor for breakfast. Unless breakfast is being served in conjunction with an important presentation or high-profile speaker, count on at least 10 percent slippage, a figure that tends to increase toward the end of the meeting.

In addition, location and weather can affect the no-show factor at breakfast. For instance, if your group is in San Diego on a beautiful day, you'll lose some attendees to the sunshine. Or if your group is meeting in New Orleans or Las Vegas, and everyone has been out partying or gaming until the wee hours of the morning, you can expect a smaller turnout for breakfast. In fact, you may want to reschedule the morning meal altogether and consider a hearty brunch instead.

## **Breakfast Choices**

There are three basic choices for the morning meal: a plated breakfast, a buffet breakfast and a Continental breakfast. As with every food and beverage event, the breakfast menu and setup you choose should be determined based on your budget, the profile of your attendees and your objectives for the event. For instance, if you have a breakfast speaker, your setup will be different than if your attendees are simply grabbing a bite on their way to the first breakout session of the day.

### ***Plated Breakfast***

Plated breakfasts offer exceptional opportunities for your guests to enjoy a served meal and spend quality time with fellow attendees. Plated breakfasts served family-style offer even more of a chance for relaxed networking. Some meeting planners choose this option and set the room in crescent rounds—round tables with seating halfway around the table and with all chairs positioned toward to the speaker—so that they can use the same room for both the breakfast and the morning program.

Plated breakfasts generally cost less than a buffet because there is less wasted food, but they limit the food choice for your attendees. Plated breakfasts also set a more rigid time frame for attendees, as the entire group needs to be present before service begins in order to preserve the food quality.



### **Buffet Breakfast**

A buffet breakfast tends to be the most expensive option for the morning meal, but it offers your attendees more freedom to choose the foods they would like to eat. For that reason, attendees prefer buffet breakfasts. If your meeting schedule doesn't call for a breakfast speaker, attendees usually prefer a buffet because they have more choices and more hot items, and they're able to set their own schedules.

#### **Make Breakfast Flow**

For the most successful Continental breakfast, follow the station order listed below.

- Juice glasses
- Juice
- Plates/forks/knives/spoons/napkins
- Pastries (with a toaster for bagels)
- Butter/jam
- Fruit
- Coffee cups
- Regular coffee
- Decaf coffee
- Tea
- Cream, sugar and Sweet & Low/Splenda/Equal (ideally set on a separate section)

### **Continental Breakfast**

Because you don't have to worry about food choices, a Continental breakfast is often the best choice for a working breakfast in a meeting room. The Continental option is a great way to allow attendees to eat at their leisure; they can arrive early or right on time and have food available.

At a minimum, a Continental breakfast consists of coffee, juice and pastries. Additionally, it can include fruit, yogurt, cereal, granola, milk or other pick-up items. (See sidebar on facing page for details on ordering Continental breakfast menu items.)

The only drawback to a Continental breakfast is that some attendees need more than a muffin and coffee for breakfast, and they may feel cheated with this option. The best way to avoid disappointment is to add enhancements such as ham, egg and cheese croissants or sausage biscuits. These additions will provide a hot item and satisfy the more hearty eaters. Finally, when fitting a Continental breakfast into your budget, be sure to find out whether the facility charges for seating or rolled silverware

at a buffet-style Continental breakfast.

### **Breakfast on a Budget**

Breakfast can be a good place to trim your food and beverage budget. If you need to cut costs, consider some of the following tips.

- **Size matters.** Ask what size juice glasses and coffee cups the hotel uses. Can you use coffee cups and saucers instead of mugs? If the hotel uses juice glasses that are 8- or

10-ounce, can it replace them with glasses that are 5- or 6-ounce? If smaller glasses and cups are used, the attendees will consume less juice and coffee.

- **Portion control.** Ask that bagels be cut in half. Also, verify the size of muffins and Danish to make sure you are ordering correct quantities. For instance, if the hotel makes mini-muffins, you'll need more than if it makes extra-large muffins. In fact, it's a good idea to ask the hotel to show you a muffin and Danish so you can view the size for yourself.
- **Juicy variety.** Canned juices such as apple, cranberry or tomato are often less expensive than orange juice, so they make good supplements to strictly fresh juices.
- **Drop-in ready.** Some attendees will simply step in, get coffee and leave, so consider having a "coffee only" station near the entrance. This station will not only increase convenience for the attendees, but it may also reduce your consumption of food.
- **Save the best for last.** If you are ordering more expensive breakfast food items for one day only, do this on the last day, as more people tend to skip breakfast as the meeting goes along.
- **Go whole.** Whole fruit is cheaper than sliced fruit. You can sometimes get whole fruit on consumption, which means you pay only for the fruit that is eaten. Bananas are more popular than other fruit, so always order more bananas than anything else.
- **Small servings.** Use nothing larger than bread and butter plates.
- **More with less.** Rather than offering a full breakfast buffet, simply upgrade a Continental breakfast with hot breakfast sandwiches such as ham and cheese croissants, breakfast burritos, sausage biscuits and French toast sticks.

## Your Order's Up!

### Tips for Ordering Continental Breakfast Items

#### Juice

Most hotels use 5- or 6-ounce juice glasses. You will get 20-25 servings of juice per gallon. Experient recommends that you order enough juice to give each attendee one glass. Varieties may include orange, apple, tomato, cranberry, pineapple and V8, among others. Order at least two types of juice with 80 percent orange juice. (For instance, if you have 110 guests, order four gallons of orange juice and one gallon of tomato or apple juice.) For cost-conscious groups, keep your options to two juice types. The more juice types you order, the greater the potential of waste.

#### Pastries

Order a variety of pastries, including sweet (Danish, doughnuts, muffins, fruit breads) and non-sweet (bagels, plain croissants, brioche). For most groups, order about half sweet pastries and half non-sweet. Order a minimum of one to one and a half pastries per person.

#### Fruit

Order fruit by the tray rather than per person. Start by asking the hotel how much fruit comes on a tray, or how many people one tray will serve. A good rule of thumb is to order enough fruit to allow each person to get 3 ounces. If a la carte pricing is not published for breakfast, you can often find fruit tray pricing on reception menus. Many hotels will allow you to purchase whole fruit on consumption. That is, you pay only for the pieces of fruit that are eaten. If not, ask the hotel to ensure that leftovers be carried over to the following days.

#### Yogurt, Cereal and Granola Bars

At most facilities, cereal and yogurt can be provided in individual servings, but you should ask, as these items are not always on the banquet menus. In theory, both yogurt and cereal can be purchased on a consumption basis, and you should definitely try to purchase this way. Be careful not to over-order; plan on 20 percent of the group eating cereal or yogurt.



# Breaks

While the meeting room remains the center of formal content delivery, breaks between scheduled events are the hub of networking activity. Having the right mix of food and beverage in the proper presentation will create breaks that will further a meeting's objectives.

Begin the planning of each break by asking a few key questions: What is your budget for the break? What are you trying to accomplish? How can you best meet the needs of your attendees and stay within your budget?

## Take a Break

In most cases, you have two general choices when it comes to planning breaks: You can order either a break package or a consumption break.

### *Break Packages*

Breaks that have been packaged and themed by the hotel or convention venue can offer a fun atmosphere for your attendees to network and a great way to spark conversation. Break packages are priced per person, so you can plan ahead for your exact costs with no worries about going over budget. One price per person includes everything for the time allotted for the break. In addition to morning and afternoon per-person breaks, conference centers offer all-day break packages as a part of their service. Usually a break package will incorporate hot and cold beverages, foods and decor, all related to a certain theme.

Most convention properties have a number of break packages from which you can choose. The benefit of using a break package is that you'll know exactly what to expect, cost-wise. But if your attendees don't consume much food or many drinks during the break, you may pay less with a consumption break.

### *Consumption Breaks*

Consumption breaks allow you to tailor a break to your specific needs or ideas and order items by quantities. This type of break may seem like it would cost less, but depending on how much your attendees consume, it could actually be more expensive. There is the risk of running out of food or beverages or having to add items during the event, which could threaten your budget. However, if you keep track of your attendees' consumption at breaks from year to year, that historical data can help you plan for subsequent years.

For new meetings with no consumption history, Experient has developed a number of formulas that have proven to be successful in planning beverage breaks. As you create and maintain group histories, these formulas will probably need to be altered for each specific group.

The guidelines for consumption break ordering assume the following:

- These are a.m. and p.m. breaks, not a Continental breakfast.
- 90 percent of a.m. attendees drink hot beverages.
- 60 percent of p.m. attendees drink cold beverages.
- There are 20 cups of coffee per gallon or 15 mugs of coffee per gallon.
- Coffee can be purchased by the gallon or half-gallon.
- Always order “brewed” decaf and have signage indicating decaf or regular.
- Always order soft drinks on a “consumption” basis (you pay only for what you consume).
- No additional drinks are being offered during these breaks (i.e. juice, lemonade, etc.). If other drink items are being served, these formulas will yield too large a volume.
- For outside breaks (i.e. sunshine and warm air of 80 degrees or higher), increase soft drinks by 10 percent and decrease hot drinks by 10 percent.
- The hotel will provide signage to designate that the break is for your group.

*Note:* Because the following formulas are geared toward cost savings, the quantities are conservative. Be prepared to order more.

### Ordering Drinks

Experient has created several formulas (see charts A-C below and examples 1 and 2 on page 25) to help you determine the amounts of beverages needed, depending on the demographics of your group and the time of day.

1. First, locate the percentage associated with the makeup of your group—all male, all female or 50/50.
2. Multiply that percentage by your overall group attendance.
3. Divide the resulting number by 20 (number of cups per gallon) or 15 (number of mugs per gallon) to determine the number of gallons needed.
4. Round each partial gallon up to the next highest half-gallon.
5. To determine your group’s consumption rate, use these figures for the first day’s break and, once on-site, adjust as needed.



**CHART A: A.M. BREAKS**

Beverages		All Male	All Female	50/50
Regular coffee	Attendance	X 60%	X 50%	X 55%
Decaf coffee	Attendance	X 20%	X 25%	X 25%
Hot tea	Attendance	X 10%	X 15%	X 10%
Soft drinks/alternate beverage	Attendance	X 25%	X 25%	X 25%

**CHART B: P.M. BREAKS**

Beverages		All Male	All Female	50/50
Regular coffee	Attendance	X 35%	X 30%	X 35%
Decaf coffee	Attendance	X 20%	X 20%	X 20%
Hot tea	Attendance	X 10%	X 15%	X 10%
Soft drinks/alternate beverage	Attendance	X 70%	X 70%	X 70%



**CHART C: A.M. BREAKS (Hot Beverages Only)**

Beverages		All Male	All Female	50/50
Regular coffee	Attendance	X 70%	X 55%	X 65%
Decaf coffee	Attendance	X 25%	X 30%	X 30%
Hot tea	Attendance	X 10%	X 20%	X 10%

**Number of Stations and Amount of Beverages Per Station**

Length of Break	# of People	Min. Total # of Beverages
15 minutes	100 people per station	5 gallons of drinks
20 minutes	130 people per station	6 1/2 gallons of drinks
30 minutes	200 people per station	10 gallons of drink

*The shorter the break, the more stations you need so that everyone has an opportunity to get a beverage. Also, consider that with short breaks of 30 minutes or less, the limited time and the distance from the break to the banquet service area may make replenishment challenging.*

**EXAMPLE 1**

For a morning break at a conference with 500 male attendees, the formula should be calculated as follows:

All Male / 500 people/ A.M. break			
Regular	60% x 500	= 300 cups	= 15 gallons
Decaf	20% x 500	= 100 cups	= 5 gallons
Tea	10% x 500	= 50 cups	= 2.5 gallons
Soft Drinks	25% x 500	= 125 sodas	

**EXAMPLE 2**

For an afternoon break at a conference with 625 attendees, half of whom are male and half of whom are female, the formula should be calculated as follows:

50/50 group / 625 people / P.M. break			
Regular	35% x 625	= 218 cups	= 10.9 or 11 gallons
Decaf	20% x 625	= 125 cups	= 6.25 or 6.5 gallons
Tea	10% x 625	= 62 cups	= 3.1 or 3.5 gallons
Soft Drinks	70% x 625	= 438 sodas	

What should you do if the amount of beverages you need to order, according to these formulas, is beyond your budget? Keep in mind that almost all regular coffee drinkers will drink decaf if regular is gone, but very few decaf coffee drinkers will drink regular if decaf is gone. So if you need to reduce quantities, reduce the amount of regular coffee ordered. Also, keep in mind that if there is a Starbucks or another coffee bar on the property, you may have a decrease in coffee consumption because people will buy their own drinks at the coffee bar instead.

Another way to keep beverage breaks within your budget is to serve hot beverages only in the morning and cold beverages only in the afternoon, rather than have both options available at both the morning and afternoon breaks. When serving soft drinks, keep traffic moving by having cans set on ice or pre-filled cups of ice ready to grab and go. Also, keep in mind that some cities have an additional tax on soft drinks; ask the hotel about this during the planning stages so you'll know whether to include it in your budget. In addition, if you're serving water, consider that many attendees will drink coffee or a soft drink at the break, as well as pick up several bottled waters to save for later.

## Ordering Food

There are a number of food items you can order on a consumption basis such as whole fruit, packaged cookies, bags of peanuts, granola bars and candy bars. A reasonable rule is to order enough food items for 75 percent of the group on the first day, and then adjust the numbers as needed for the remainder of the meeting. Also, don't forget to inventory food items in and out, which means to count the items prior to and after each break.

If, however, you find your attendees packing their conference bags with snacks for later, you may want to consider ordering in bulk or ordering items that must be consumed at that time. Some examples include large bowls of popcorn, hot pretzels with mustard or slices of apple strudel served by a break attendant.

While budgetary considerations are important, it's also essential to make your breaks a true pick-me-up for attendees. Here are some creative ideas:

- **Hold the sweets.** When you need to keep attendees alert for sessions, avoid a break high in sugar or carbs. Ideas range from individual vegetable crudites in martini or shot glasses to mixed nuts served warm with different seasonings. Dried fruits, fruit smoothies, flavored popcorn and even beef jerky are other popular options.

- **Pick a theme.** Insert fun and creativity into the day with theme breaks celebrating chocoholics, favorite movies or popular TV shows. A hotel in Charlotte, N.C., recently served breaks focusing on single colors. The red break featured apples, cranberry juice, Red Bull and Linzer Torte cookies; the orange break included oranges, Orange Nehi and orange peanuts; and the yellow break featured lemonade with fresh lemon slices, packages of Starburst, smiley-face lollipops and lemon bars.

- **Tie it in.** Use your breaks to reinforce a function's overall theme. The theme of Experient's recent annual meeting was "Driving Business." A Route 66 Continental breakfast and break incorporated food from all the different "stops" along the famous highway.

## Successful Setup

How many times have you walked up to a coffee station only to discover that the cups are at one end of the table, the coffee at the opposite end and the milk and sugar in the middle? To avoid traffic flow problems, follow these guidelines:

- **Arrange coffee stations in this order:** Place coffee cups at the end of the table closest to the meeting room doors, then decaf coffee, tea bags, hot water for tea, spoons and a receptacle for used tea bags. Condiments (cream, sugar, honey and/or lemon) should be placed at the end of the station or ideally on a separate station. For large groups, set up a separate condiment table about 4 feet



past each coffee station to allow attendees to move through the line quickly.

• **Arrange soft drink service in this order:**

Place glasses at the end of the table closest to the meeting room doors, then ice (with at least one scoop), soft drinks and a container or space for empty cans or bottles at the end of the station. Store extra soft drinks and glasses under the station so that replenishment, if needed, does not have to be carried through a crowd.

- Set up one beverage station for every 75 to 100 guests, and set up separate soft drink stations for groups of 100 or more.
- Spread out stations and place them away from meeting room doors so that bottleneaking is kept to a minimum.
- In large break areas, open stations farthest from the meeting room doors first.



### Keeping Track of Inventory

Many meeting planners have received their final bill from a facility and thought, “I don’t remember serving that much coffee,” or “Wow — we went through a lot of sodas!” Easy ways to minimize final bill surprises include communicating your replenishment requirements (“reorder only upon approval of authorized signature”) and specifying ending times for breaks on your paperwork. Always agree to quantities served and actual counts immediately following a function, rather than a month later. The facility will have served numerous groups since yours and memories fade. Another beneficial practice is to inventory sodas in and out. Here’s how:

#### Soda Inventory — In

- Always inventory in at the time of setup and do it with a banquet person present.
- Initial his or her count or have him or her initial yours.
- Remember that the hotel staff is responsible for preventing other groups from dipping into your break. If another group breaks early, ask a banquet person to guard your break.
- Never sign a bill until after the break.

#### Soda Inventory — Out

- Inventory as soon as the break is over.
- Always inventory out with a banquet person present and have him or her sign your final count (or you sign the banquet check).
- If sodas are taken by your group while the inventory is in progress always give the property credit.
- Once the inventory is done, remind the banquet person to remove the station since your official break time is over.

### NOT AN EXACT SCIENCE

When ordering for your next break, remember that the formulas cited here are intended to represent the average for various groups and not your group’s individual consumption rate. Thus, they cannot necessarily be applied across the board.

As with any menu planning, the most important factor is to know your group. For this reason, we recommend using these formulas to calculate quantities for the first day’s breaks and then adjusting the numbers as needed. At the end of your breaks, go so far as to check inside the urns to see how much coffee is left over from what you originally ordered or from what you reordered. This is what you should take into consideration when adjusting the following days’ orders. As you collect consumption history from year to year, your initial order should become more and more accurate.

# Receptions

Focused on networking and entertainment for attendees, receptions offer a perfect opportunity to create a positive, memorable event experience. As in planning any food and beverage event, first consider your budget for the reception, the profile of your attendees and the objective of the function. How can you best showcase your reception with the budget you have to work with and the goals your group has in mind?

4

## Ordering Food

Many hotels and off-site venues offer reception packages, which are priced per person and offer a mix of food items that will be replenished as needed during the agreed-upon time frame for the reception. This option can be ideal because you know up front exactly what you'll be charged for each person in attendance. However, if your attendees are not hearty eaters at receptions, this option could turn out to be more expensive than ordering a la carte. However, don't always assume that a hotel's per-person menu price is more expensive than an a la carte reception. Ask how many pieces it includes and do the math yourself.

An a la carte reception menu allows you to control price and quantity. You have complete flexibility on what to order and how much to order, but there is always risk involved. When you order hors d'oeuvres by the piece or platter, you have to estimate how much your attendees will consume and manipulate those estimates to stay within your budget. For instance, if your attendees arrive hungry and mistake the reception for their dinner, the property may have to bring out additional items, which could send you over budget.

## How Much to Order?

Without appropriate guarantees, setups and controls, even the most generous supply of hors d'oeuvres can be depleted quickly. Consider the following factors to help you determine how much food to order and how to maximize the quantity of food you can afford.

**Your audience.** The more accustomed people are to hors d'oeuvres, the fewer they're likely to consume. Doctors, lawyers and bankers, for example, typically underconsume hors d'oeuvres because they regularly attend receptions, banquets and other elegant social events. For these attendees, you can order less food and still have some left over. Conversely, people who rarely attend cocktail parties, dinners and other social functions tend to consume more hors d'oeuvres. For such groups, proper planning is essential.

**Purpose of the event.** When the purpose of the reception is to network (which means not providing much/any seating or too many distractions), consumption won't be high because eating is not the primary focus for attendees. Consumption at a welcome reception, when it is the first time people have seen each other in a while, is usually lower than consumption on the following evenings.



**Passed butler-style service.** Having your hors d'oeuvres passed by waiters wearing white gloves conveys an upscale atmosphere, but in reality it's actually the least expensive way to serve them. When food is displayed on a buffet table so that guests can help themselves, they will likely eat much more than if the food was passed butler-style. Passing hors d'oeuvres also gives you the ability to control the pace of service. You can stagger service by sending out waiters with trays every 15 minutes, for example, instead of bringing all the food out at one time. And if you serve only one type of hors d'oeuvre per tray, people will usually limit themselves while waiting for a different type to be passed.

**Buffet setup.** The physical setup of buffets can make access to food easy or difficult, which can control, limit or extend the length of time that your food lasts. (See diagrams on page 37.) With 360-degree access to food, guests may consume eight to 10 hors d'oeuvres each. With 180-degree access to food, however, the figure drops to six to eight pieces per person. Obviously, the more access, the greater the consumption. Experient recommends placing the more expensive food towards the back of the room and the less expensive items near the doors.

A trend to watch: Many facilities are utilizing tabletop grills or custom-built ovens that can cook food on the buffet in order to eliminate the look of multiple silver chafing dishes. Another trend is to place individual servings under heat lamps, such as lobster macaroni and cheese or long skewers of grilled shrimp, which are continually replenished.

**Plate size.** The size of the plates used on a buffet table also has an impact on consumption. Bread and butter plates make it more difficult to pile on the food. (Granted, nothing is impossible and determined individuals can always find a way to recreate the Leaning Tower of Pisa on their plate.) Salad plates, the next size larger, are the type most commonly used for receptions. Dinner plates should be used only if the food items being served constitute dinner and you are providing seating for almost all the attendees; anything else will look skimpy on such a big plate. An oversize plate is also wasted at a multiple-station receptions, since many people visit one station at a time.

**Beyond plates.** In the effort to create a memorable experience, consider alternatives to plates. A current trend is to serve food on surprising or unique items. Experient clients have enjoyed crème brûlée served in individual porcelain spoons, oyster shots or shrimp shooters served in shot glasses, mashed potato bars utilizing martini glasses, and individual Caesar salads in martini glasses. Another trend is to serve miniature entrées or courses on smaller plates such as a bite-size filet over rosemary mashed potatoes or grilled shrimp over risotto.

**Variety of food.** Receptions are like Sunday brunch in that most people like to sample a little bit of everything. So, for a 500-person reception, it makes more sense to order 500 pieces each of four different types of hors d'oeuvres than 250 pieces each of eight different types. Offering larger quantities of fewer kinds of hors d'oeuvres will help you feed more guests and ultimately minimize the chance that you will run out of food. You can always supplement the menu with less expensive foods such as cheese and crackers, chips and dip, and fruits and vegetables. If you need to reorder food during a function, remember that it is likely you can only order menu items that are frozen, not those prepared on site. It requires approximately 20 minutes to replenish an item after you have requested it.

**Distractions.** Consumption also drops when music, entertainment or dancing distract delegates. If they're on the dance floor or entranced by the entertainment, they're less likely to concentrate on the food. However, alcohol consumption may increase based on the activity level of the attendees.

**Tables and chairs.** The availability of tables and chairs encourages people to sit and eat rather than mix and mingle. The result? Increased consumption. Chairs for 25 percent to 30 percent of attendees is usually sufficient.



**Time of the event.** If the reception is scheduled for 5 p.m. or 6 p.m., most people will not assume that it is intended to take the place of dinner. If it's scheduled for 7 p.m. or 8 p.m., however, most people will consider it to be dinner and consequently eat more. Always go back to the first consideration, which is your audience. If you have a large number of international attendees, they may be used to a heavier meal at lunch or a later dinner.

**Location of the event.** If the function is off site, everyone may not attend. And if transportation to an off-site event isn't provided, attendance drops even further. Therefore, you can reduce the number of hors d'oeuvres that you order. If the reception is held outside the meeting room, on the other hand, most delegates will attend.

### What Kind to Order?

In addition to ordering the right amount of food, it's important to order the right types of food. Start by ordering a variety of food for all palates, including vegetarian, protein and carbohydrates, and be conscious of religious holidays or customs and take that into account.

When ordering a reception a la carte, consider the following guidelines to make sure your reception includes enough variety. *Note:* The quantities suggested are minimum recommendations.

- Dry snacks. Order approximately 1 ounce per person.
- Anchor foods, such as cheese and vegetables. Order for a minimum of one-third of all attendees.
- Action stations, where food is prepared or carved, such as pasta, stir-fry or round of beef. Order for a minimum of one-half to two-thirds of all attendees. For pasta stations, use bow-tie pasta, tortellini or penne rather than linguini, angel hair or fettuccine. Long pastas are difficult to eat during a reception. To make the event more experiential, consider pairing drinks, such as cucumber gin sours and citrus mojitos, with certain interactive stations.
- Individual piece items such as beef skewers, crab cakes and vegetable egg rolls. Order a minimum of one of each hors d'oeuvre per person; for instance, if you have 300 people, order 300 spring rolls and 300 shrimp empanadas.
- Desserts aren't included in all receptions, but if you include them, order for one-third to one-half of all attendees, unless it's strictly a dessert reception.
- For items that are priced by the person, such as cheese or vegetable trays, find out how many pieces or ounces are factored into the price. As a rule of thumb, order two-thirds hot items and one-third cold items. Ask about the size of various hors d'oeuvres, or even better, ask to see samples. Seeing samples can help determine the number of bites each item involves when counting "pieces" per person. Some items are large enough to be considered two pieces.
- For networking receptions, you'll want to order bite-sized food that people can pop into their mouths in one bite versus three or four bites that they must continue to hold in their fingers.

### Ordering Liquor

Research shows that people are consuming less alcohol overall at meetings, but cocktail receptions still rack up high liquor prices for meeting planners. In fact, the gross profit on liquor at a cocktail function can be as high as 65 percent, which makes liquor a much larger profit center than food. However, if you simply take control of your event, it's possible to save anywhere from 30 percent to 40 percent on hosted beverage functions.

You'll need to determine whether to offer a hosted bar, cash bar or a combination of both, in which attendees receive a set number of drink tickets and then pay for their own beverages after those are used. For cash bars, discuss whether the bartenders will handle the money or if a cashier is required. Decide whether you'll serve beer and wine only, and whether you'll serve premium or call brands. Ask your catering professional if there is any dead stock wine (wine no longer on the standard list, but available in lower quantities) that may be cheaper. It's also a good idea to consider whether the bar needs to open and close at certain times. For instance, will it remain open during meal service or reopen afterward?

### Choosing a Liquor Plan

The following outlines the most popular plans for purchasing alcohol.

**Per-person/unlimited consumption plan.** For an agreed-upon time frame, the hotel provides all the liquor, and you pay one price regardless of actual consumption. The advantage of a per-person or unlimited consumption plan is that you know in advance what the damage will be at the end of the evening. It can be the most expensive way to pay for a hosted bar. Here's why: When you purchase liquor on an unlimited consumption basis, the hotel sets a price that takes into *continued on page 34*





*continued from page 31* account the worst-case scenario. So unless the majority of your attendees are heavy drinkers, you'll end up spending more than if you had purchased it by the bottle or by the drink.

**Per-drink plan.** The hotel charges a set price, such as \$7.25, for each alcoholic drink. After the event, the hotel measures what was actually consumed and bills you for all of those drinks at the \$7.25 price, plus tax and gratuity.

**Per-bottle plan.** The hotel establishes the cost of each full bottle of liquor, and you pay for every bottle that's opened. For example, if the bottle price is \$95 and your group consumes two and a half bottles of liquor, you would pay for all three opened bottles. Note: This plan is used for suite-based receptions, but almost never in a hotel function room.

**Cash bar.** Each individual is responsible for paying for his or her own drinks. This eliminates all costs to the client, with the possible exception of bartender fees.

**Drink tickets.** The host provides a set number of drink tickets for each person. They can be provided in the registration packet or at the door to the event. Because attendees cannot obtain a drink without a ticket (unless they pay for it themselves), you know in advance the guaranteed maximum price you'll pay for liquor. Drink tickets, when redeemed, should be categorized by drink type (liquor, beer, wine, soda) and price to make tracking easier.

### **Determining Consumption on the Per-Drink Plan**

First, you must inventory each bar prior to the event so that you know exactly how many bottles of liquor and which brands you started with. (See inventory tips below.) You should also know the size of the bottles (usually 1 liter) and how many ounces of liquor will be poured in each drink. Drinks normally have either 1 ounce, 1 1/8 ounce or 1 1/4 ounce of liquor in them depending on the standard at the hotel you choose. (Be sure to use Posi-Pour or similar tops that control the pour.)

Once the event ends, check the bar to determine how many empty bottles are left as well as how much remains in any partial bottles. (This practice helps mitigate disputes when the hotel claims one consumption amount and the client claims another.) Multiply the number of empty bottles times the number of drinks in each bottle. Then estimate how much liquor was used in the partial bottles.

You will do this with the bartender or beverage manager. The standard measurement is "tenths" of a bottle. If your partial has 0.4 gone from the bottle, you would multiply 0.4 times the number of drinks in a bottle.

**Example:** At your bar, you used 2 bottles of gin and 0.6 of the remaining gin bottle. Since you were pouring 1 1/4-ounce drinks out of liter bottles, there were 27 drinks in each bottle.

2 empty bottles X 27 drinks = 54 drinks  
 Partial was 0.6 empty X 27 drinks = 16.2 drinks  
 Your group consumed 66.2 gin drinks at that bar.

Repeat the process for all the types of liquor, and you will know how much was consumed at that bar. *Hint:* If you have multiple bars, then consolidate all the liquor from the function as soon as the reception ends so that you only have to count once for each type of liquor.

### **Per-Drink Versus Unlimited Consumption**

Consider the following example for a group of 225 men averaging 2.2 drinks per person when using inventory and pouring controls at 3 bars.

**Per-Drink Plan:** \$7.25 per drink x 2.2 drinks x 225 people = \$3,589 total cost

**Unlimited Consumption Plan:** \$18.50 per person x 225 people = \$4,163 total cost

As you can see, the per-drink plan offers the lowest price in this example. Not all hotels offer the unlimited consumption or hourly plan, but all offer the per-drink plan. The per-drink plan is the plan that most knowledgeable planners use to keep a lid on costs.

### Keeping up With Inventory

It's crucial to inventory all bars to determine how much liquor was actually consumed at your reception. (Experient recommends one bartender and one bar for every 75 guests at hosted bars and one bartender per 100 guests at cash bars.) An "inventory in" should take place once the bars are set up in the function room (usually 30 to 45 minutes before the event begins). To inventory in, count the number of bottles of each type of liquor. Write down the figures on an inventory sheet and ask the bartender to initial it.

Instruct the bartenders:

- Not to discard any empty liquor or wine bottles.
- Not to use empties as water bottles (so they don't get confused with the actual liquor you're paying for).
- Not to give out any liquor or wine by the bottle.
- No additional bottles can be brought to the bar (in case you run out) except through you so that you can keep track.

Similarly, an "inventory out" should be conducted in the same room where the cocktail reception is held (if possible). To inventory out, check under the bar and on the table behind the bar for extra empties. Then recount the number of bottles of each type of liquor, noting how many full bottles were used and how many will be returned to the hotel. For partial bottles, estimate the amount consumed to the nearest tenth. Write down the figures on the inventory sheet and ask the bartender to initial it. *Hint:* 1/10 of a liter bottle is 2.7 drinks if you are pouring 1 1/4 ounce drinks.

### Control the Pour

Explain to the bartenders that they are not allowed to free pour. Require all bartenders to use a device like a Posi-Pour, which controls the amount of liquor poured. Posi-Pours are available in 1 ounce, 1 1/4 ounce and six other sizes from Magnuson Industries at (815) 229-2970.

If you're using the bottle plan, you can further reduce your liquor bill by "marrying" the bars before the function ends. If you have four bars, for example, close one station 15 minutes before the reception ends. Then take the partials to bar No. 1 and gradually close the party bar by bar. This strategy enables the bartenders to use partials before opening any more new bottles, thereby reducing the number of opened bottles that you have to pay for — and gives attendees the message that the party is coming to an end.

### Actual Consumption Variables

Many variables impact how much liquor will be consumed at a cocktail reception. Keep the following points in mind.

**Average per person consumption will decrease if:**

- The event is on the evening of the major arrival day.
- The event is before 5 p.m. or after 8 p.m.
- There are hors d'oeuvres served. (It's hard to hold a drink and eat hors d'oeuvres off a plate at the same time.)
- There are activities in the reception area.

Number of Drinks Per Liquor Bottle			
	1 oz. drinks	1 1/8 oz. drinks	1 1/4 oz. drinks
Liter (33.8 oz.)	33	30	27
Fifth of Liter (25.3 oz. - .750ml)	25	22.5	20

Number of Drinks Per Wine Bottle*			
	oz. per bottle	5 oz. glasses	5 1/4 oz. glasses
1/2 Carafe	16.9	3.38	3
Fifth of Liter	25.6	5	4.6
Fifth Liter	25.3	5	4.6
Quart	32	6.4	5.8
Liter/Carafe	33.8	6.7	6.1
Magnum	51.2	10.2	9.3
3 Liters	101.4	20.2	18.4
Gallon	128	25.6	23.3

\* Experient recommends ordering one wine bottle for every three people at a banquet dinner. If your group history indicates greater consumption, order according to that history.

- The event is on the recreation day and follows the conclusion of the activities by two or more hours.
- There is a cash bar.
- The group is predominately female.

**Average per person consumption will increase if:**

- The event is on the final night of the meeting.
- The event is scheduled between 6 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.
- The event is outdoors in a warm climate.
- The event is held during the Super Bowl or any other major sports event where there is a large video screen in use.
- Dry (salted) snacks are the only type offered.
- There is a hosted bar.
- The group is predominantly male.



**How Many Drinks Will You Pay For?**

Facilities calculate how many drinks your attendees consumed by counting the bottles of liquor used and figuring that each liter bottle yielded 27 drinks (based on 1.25 ounces of liquor in each drink). But free-pouring bartenders may use more liquor, raising the bottle count—and the count could go higher still if you don't monitor the inventory. The result: You may pay for more “drinks” than your guests actually consumed. Here's how the drink count may vary with and without controls on pouring and inventory (per person, for a one-hour reception).

Average Drink Consumption (during a one-hour reception)			
Group Demographics	Using inventory & Posi-Pour system	Using inventory & jigger pour	Using no control
Predominantly male	2.2	2.7	3 to 3.6
50% male/50% female	1.8	2.4	2.8 to 3.3
Predominantly female	1.3	1.9	2.4 to 2.7



**EXPERIENCE THIS**

**Race to the Reception**

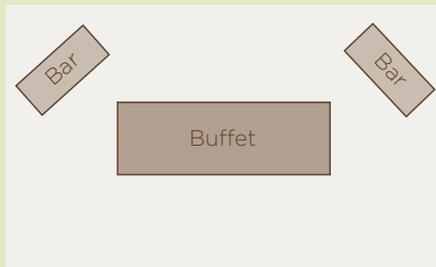
At a recent event in Charlotte, N.C., a reception was held at the NASCAR racing facility. Attendees started the evening with the opportunity to ride in a race car with a professional driver at the wheel. The reception was held in one of the garages, which is used for car maintenance during a race. While the garage was set up to host the reception, a race car was still parked inside. With cars out on the track and a band playing in the garage, the noise and the feel of the race-track surrounded attendees even once they were inside the garage.

## Buffet Setups' Impact on Food Consumption



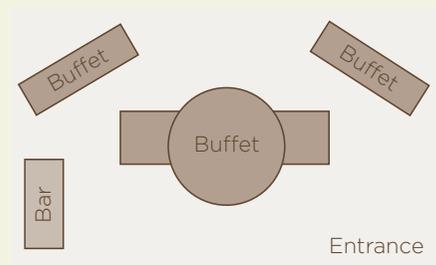
### 180° Buffet

Buffets with only a 180° access are useful in limiting or minimizing consumption. If a budget is limited or insufficient for unlimited hors d'oeuvres, then this limited-access buffet setup can help the food last for a longer period into the reception.



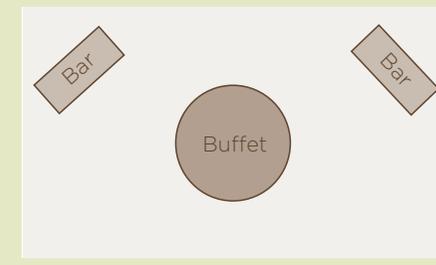
### 360° Buffet

A 360° buffet provides convenient and fairly easy access to food. The lines can start at either end of this buffet and will be shorter. If this is truly a double-sided buffet, then food on both sides of buffet will be identical.



### 360° Buffet & Multiple Station

Multiple buffets with good access placed throughout a room provide virtually unlimited access to food for all the guests. This setup will dramatically reduce lines—but will increase your budget. This “easy access” option is not recommended for the cost-conscious.



### Round Buffet

A round buffet for hors d'oeuvres has no beginning and no end for lines to form naturally, so people are forced to surround the table. This buffet actually helps limit consumption. This type of buffet setup should be used as more of an elaborate display with fruit, cheese and vegetables. It is an attractive and elegant addition to a reception.

## Buffet Setups' Impact on Reception Consumption

### Food Access

	Passed	180	360	Multi 360	Round
Pieces per person WITH plates	N/A	7-8	8-10	10-12	6-7
Pieces per person WITHOUT plates	4-5	5	6-8	8-9	5-6

The diagrams and chart on this page assume the following:

- Hors d'oeuvres are not actually dinner.
- Your group is made up of males and females who are on neither the upper nor lower financial scale.
- The function will be one hour in length, occurring sometime between 5:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.

# Banquet Functions

When many meeting planners and attendees think about food and beverage at a meeting or event, banquet functions come to mind first. Whether it's lunch, dinner or an awards gala, the banquet meal offers an opportunity to bring attendees together for an extended period of time, enjoying food, drink and entertainment in a special atmosphere.

At a recent awards banquet on the closing night of a corporate meeting, the entire ballroom was draped in white, and all guests were asked to wear white. Planners had ordered lighted tables, a lighted dance floor and a martini bar with a luge so the free-flowing martinis were ice cold. The effect was a glittering room that shimmered with light. With careful planning and thorough execution, every banquet meal can offer such a complete and memorable experience.

## Demographics and Purpose of Event

As with any event, begin your planning by considering the age, gender, job and level of sophistication of your attendees. Find out if they have special dietary requirements, such as vegetarian, vegan, kosher or diabetic. Also, consider the purpose of the event: Do you want to foster networking or is the focus entertainment or a speaker? Would a plated meal or a buffet be more appropriate? Will food stations promote people moving throughout the room and networking? Should hors d'oeuvres be passed around so that attendees can focus on exhibits or one another instead of food stations?

Next, determine whether the function will have a theme, and if so, how it will impact the food and décor. Check with your catering professional to see what the hotel provides or offers by way of décor and themed events. It is likely that the hotel has a repertoire of proven successes that highlight the city or venue your attendees are experiencing. The hotel can also guide you and help you partner with area providers specializing in talent, linen and floral designs, pre-qualified off-premise locations, caterers and others. Use their resources. As partners in your program, they share your goal of making the event a success.

Determine whether there are any sponsorships or affiliations that require the use of certain food or beverage items, such as certain soft drink brands, specific brands of dry snacks or donated products. And take a look at your guarantee: Is it based on history or is this a new event? When determining your guarantee, consider whether the function is included in the registration cost of a convention, or if people have to pay to attend. Individuals paying their own way are more likely to show up for the function. Also, be sure to include exhibitors in the count if they will be included in the event.

## Equipment and Inventory

As part of the planning process, find out how many tables and chairs are available from the facility. (Eight people can be seated comfortably at a 60-inch round table, nine at a 66-inch round and 10 at a 72-inch round.) Also ask what linen options are available, including colors, patterns or overlays, and whether they will be floor length or double-clothed to cover table legs for rounds. You might ask whether the property has any upgraded linens available at an additional cost, such as tablecloths, napkins and chair covers, and find out if there are any centerpieces or general decorations available free of charge. These might include buffet pieces, backdrops, props, carts and foliage for a stage or perimeter. Determine what is standard and the pricing for any upgrades and negotiate from there.

If you will need other equipment such as easels, risers, standing lecterns, a sound system and piped-in music, find out what is available and what the additional costs would be. Keep in mind that lighting and sound can play a vital role in setting the stage for the event experience.

If your banquet will follow a certain theme, find out the available attire for waitstaff and captains, and whether the facility will provide its staff members with specialty attire that fits your theme. If not, ask whether you will be allowed to provide it.

## Menu Selection

In your early meetings with the property's catering professional, it's a good idea to meet the chef and discuss options and ideas with him or her directly, if possible. Create an experience! Is a buffet dinner more appropriate to your networking and flow, or is this the setting for a more gracious experience built around expanded service? Maybe there are options to present food in unique ways, such as French-style service, butler-style service or plating different courses on trendy china and service pieces.

Find out about the facility's house or regional specialties, dishes that may not appear on its standard banquet menus. Inquire about seasonal items that may provide a cost savings and add the benefits of freshness and taste. Ask which items are produced in-house versus purchased. Some properties no longer have pastry kitchens, for example.

Ask to review the menu selections of other groups in-house at same time. You may be able to save money by ordering some or all of the same items.

Do a tasting once you have narrowed down the options for your event. Take photos of the dishes during the tasting or have the chef e-mail photos he or she takes. Require labeling on all buffet items. With

your catering professional, review sponsorship opportunities at each meal, such as opportunities for donated products or recognition of sponsors through chocolate logos. Remember to be creative and think outside the box with your catering professional; the food you serve at your banquet is the centerpiece of the experience.

## Food & Beverage Service

One of the first items to consider is the service ratio, or the number of waiters to guests. For sit-down or plated meals, Experient recommends a minimum of one waitperson per 25 guests at breakfast and one per 20 at lunch and dinner. If wine is being served, you may need to change the ratio to one per 15. For buffet meals, you'll need one waitperson per 40 guests at breakfast and one per 30 at lunch and dinner. (See Chapter 1 for more information.)

When meeting with your catering professional, ask if there are union issues that might impact service or create overtime issues due to the programming or length of the function. Find out what items are typically preset on the tables. If service time is an issue based on your program, ensure that any preset courses are appropriate to be preset. Do not preset hot soup or ice cream, for example.

When discussing service, costs are crucial. Be sure you have discussed all possible fees up front, starting with the following questions.

- What are the tax and service charge amounts? Is the service charge taxed? Are there additional taxes on any items, such as alcohol or soft drinks?
- What are the policies on overset, guarantee period and increases in guarantees?
- Is there a minimum number of attendees for certain meal types, such as buffets?
- Ask about per-gallon versus per-person pricing on coffee. Some venues no longer allow a per-person price or enforce a minimum guarantee. Can any of these things be negotiated?

As with food service, start the discussion about beverage service by finding out the ratio of bartenders to guests. Experient recommends one bartender for every 75 people on hosted bars and one per 100 on cash bars. (See Chapter 4 for reception guidelines.)

If wine will be served at the tables, decide whether there will be a limited number of bottles per table or glasses per person. After the first glass of wine, servers should ask guests if they would like more rather than just pouring. Find out if the facility sets both red and white wine glasses on the table or just one glass, and whether the wine is served in goblets or standard wine glasses. *continued on page 42*



*continued from page 40* This information will help you determine the number of glasses per bottle. (See Chapter 7 for suggestions on serving wine.) Let the catering manager know that you do not want to announce last call before the bar closes, which is a guaranteed way to run up your bar tab.

## Function Timeline

Remember that close communication with the facility is one of the best ways to ensure a successful banquet. Give the property, in advance, an agenda of the events taking place during the function, such as the national anthem or flag presentation, invocation, speaker, awards and music. Let the catering manager know if servers need to leave the room or stop service/clearing at any time during the program, and if any rehearsal time will be required.

In order to determine what time the doors will open, ask how long it will take to seat people. Consider how guests will be directed to their tables. If it's a more formal function, you'll probably want the staff to wait to serve a full table. If time is an issue, it might be best to begin service when attendees sit down. Ask the property to produce a diagram of the room based on your requirements.

Relay your plans for assigned seating or open seating. Let the property know if you will be using place cards, or if you need table numbers and/or number stands. Coordinate reserved seating and head tables. Will people be eating at the head table or will dignitaries take their places from reserved tables after the meal?

If meal tickets will be used, determine if your group or the facility will collect them, and whether the collection will take place at the door or at the table. Create a method for identifying guests with special meal requests; for instance, they may have a special meal ticket or they may simply notify the waitstaff. If there are printed programs, menu cards or gift items to be set out, discuss who will handle that task.

Communicate with the property your plans for coffee service. Will you serve coffee after the entrée is cleared? Should pots be placed on the table for guests during the after-dinner speaker or awards presentation?

As the event draws closer, order the centerpieces. Don't forget the head table if you'll be using one. Coordinate with the florist the time that the waitstaff will have the tables set and linens in place. Identify the tables and seats of VIPs, any special requirements and their time of arrival if it is different from the main group. Make sure the band or entertainers are aware of the schedule of events. Discuss whether the band should take breaks at certain times for coordination of meal service.

Meet your banquet manager or service captains well before guests arrive. Remember, it is easier to make adjustments in advance of a function rather than 10 minutes before the doors open. Share your expectations with them and determine the chain of command for any possible issues, guest requests or changes. Find out whether these same managers will be with you until the conclusion of your function, or if this is a shared responsibility. Verify menu arrangements and service flow. Walk room sets and confirm satisfaction. If you will be eating, ask to be served last so that you will be able to gauge what time the last guest was served, if the venue ran out of food, the temperature of the food and whether everyone is on the same course.

## Control Your Banquet With Ticket Exchange

**W**hen a meeting's closing-night banquet is automatically included in the registration fee, early departures can result in overestimated guarantees and substantial wasted money. A number of groups, especially professional associations, help take the angst out of banquet guarantees with a simple reservation process.

**1. Announce a ticket exchange.** Announce in your registration materials that there will be a ticket exchange and reserved seating for the final banquet. Indicate the hours that attendees will be able to reserve their seats while on site. Set a reservation deadline that is during your meeting, but still meets the hotel's guarantee policy. (You may want to reopen the registration desk for a short time the day of the function to accommodate last-minute changes.) You may want to negotiate with the hotel for a separate (shorter) guarantee policy for this specific function. Include in each registration packet a banquet coupon that may be exchanged for an actual banquet ticket during set hours.

**2. Estimate the number of tables.** Based on past history of the function and current registration for the event, estimate the number of tables you think you will need. Work with the hotel to create a diagram that includes the location of the dance floor and stage. Enlarge it and display it on an easel in the area where attendees will sign up for reserved seating. Make sure each table is numbered and never change the numbering once the final diagram is drawn. Use "peel-off dots" for tables that have been reserved for special guests and VIPs.

**3. Exchange coupons for tickets.** When a guest reserves a seat, exchange the banquet coupon for an actual ticket. In ink, write the guest's name and table number on it. Add a dot on the diagram each time a full table is closed out. Also, enter every assignment in a computer listing every table in numeric order. This document will become your guidebook for the event.

**4. Make a master list.** After reservations are closed, create a document that lists all attendees in alphabetical order. This will quickly pinpoint duplications. (You will already have a list organized by table numbers to answer the inevitable question: "Who else is at my table?") Provide copies of these lists to your staff and hotel staff. This will help with seating those who forget to bring their tickets. It's also helpful to have poster-size floor plans near the entrances to your room or staff dedicated to providing directions.

While the main benefit of a ticket exchange is cost-savings, attendees actually prefer the system because they can select their dinner companions in advance instead of having to stampede into a ballroom as the doors open to reserve a table. A banquet ticket exchange gives both sponsors and attendees a greater measure of control.