

MENU PLANNING

There are many things to consider when planning an event menu. We have created a list of the things we have come across as being the most important when making this important decision. This becomes especially important if you are planning menus for multiple functions. Are your attendees staying at the hotel for several days and eating mostly catered meals? If so you need to be careful to vary the foods you present from day to day. As an example you wouldn't want to serve a lemon meringue pie for dessert if you served lemon chicken the day before or blueberry lemon bread at breakfast. These details become more critical the longer the meeting is.

Some other important factors to consider:

Scheduling. It is important to consider what your attendees will be doing immediately before and after the meal. If the meal is after a reception with heavy hors d'oeuvres then it should be lighter. If they are coming from a beverage only reception then the meal should be heavier. If the attendees will be going directly into a next round of meetings then serve foods that will keep them awake like proteins and keep carbohydrates light.

Demographics: Believe it or not, the demographics of your attendees play a key role in determining an appropriate menu. Factors such as age, ethnic background, socioeconomic level, the area of the country they are from and even gender are important to consider. As an example if your attendees are largely senior citizens then you would probably want to stay away from spicy or exotic selections, Women tend to enjoy lighter meals, etc.

Local Flavor: When possible, try to incorporate the local flavors and specialties into your menu. People want to experience culinary dishes that regions are known for. Also try to use seasonal ingredients. Incorporating local ingredients also keep costs down. Try to balance flavors, colors, textures and temperatures.

Timing Between Courses: Food functions do not always run on time, especially if there are presentations or speakers during the meal. If there could be an extended period of time between courses it is important to consider how the food will hold up. Meats and proteins tend to hold up better over extended periods of time (especially if they are not cut). Dressed Salads that sit will wilt while lettuce wedges stay fresher and colder longer. Other items that hold up well over extended periods are whole, not sliced, baked goods, whole vegetables, oven-browned potatoes, rice and scrambled eggs.

How Many People are you Serving: Make sure you are selecting menu items that can be produced for your size group without sacrificing quality. For large groups think chicken and beef. They are easy to prepare and usually have many choices. Save items like lobster and roast duck for very small groups. Also consider how labor intensive the selection is as this could drive up labor needs

and thus the cost. Also for large groups, be sure that the hotel has appropriate equipment to prepare your requested items in the quantities you need. They may need multiple fryers or cook-and-hold ovens to prepare your food.

Plated or Buffet: Mix up your services, especially for long meetings. Not all services need to be plated. Consider a family style breakfast or a buffet lunch as an alternative to a plated banquet. Does the hotel offer alternative meal locations? Perhaps one of their restaurants during off peak times, how about a luncheon on a grassy area outside. Your attendees will appreciate the creativity.

Special Needs and Requests: No two attendees are the same so why would their tastes be? Be sure to pay special attention to attendee's requests especially when it comes to food allergies and intolerances, kosher meal requests and dietary restrictions. Be sure you question your attendees before you start planning. Most attendees will not say anything unless specifically asked.

Going Green: Going Green is a trend that is extending into menu planning. Many groups request that food be prepared with locally produced organic ingredients, thus cutting down on vehicle transportation and supporting food products grown without the use of pesticides. This trend also reaches into food presentation with more food stations and less hors d'oeuvres, boxed lunches that are packaged in biodegradable packaging and less plastic and more water carafes and less plastic water bottles.