



The Importance of Engaging the Conference Attendee and Addressing Their Specific Needs

Roundtable #1: Designing Memorable Meals for the Special Need Attendee

Overall Goals:

To ensure your attendees and stakeholder at your meetings/events have all their dietary requirements met thru through creative preplanning, education and detailed communication with all parties.

How to Prepare

Understanding your attendees requirements

- Ensure you have knowledge of your attendee's dietary restrictions and allergies by capturing this information on registration forms.
- Ensure you list out the major restrictions as a drop down list, otherwise they may fill in all sorts of details that are not dietary requirements but are preferential.

These can include:

- Vegetarian
- Vegan
- Gluten Free
- Peanut/Nut Allergy
- Kosher
- Other

Having "Other" allows for specific requests due to religious practices and/or specific illnesses or intolerances

Communicating your needs affectively

- Discuss your requirements with your catering point of contact
 - Allow plenty of time in advance of your program to talk with your catering contact and/or Chef.

- Bring ideas with you as to what has worked well in the past, what hasn't. if you know the demographics of your group, you will know for each meal function and restriction what might work best
 - Vegetarian meals are NOT a plate filled with all the vegetables and starch that everyone else has minus the meat!
 - Don't forget that a dietary restriction is not just about the entrée, take into consideration a lactose intolerance as it pertains to all the courses and any hors' served beforehand
 - Bring data and history to back up your requests-it's difficult to get "buy in" on the above from the Chef if he/she doesn't know what percentage of your attendance has a dietary requirement. Keep your data updated!
- Should you have any coffee breaks or buffets, have the hotel ensure in writing that they will label all items with both the ingredients but also if it is gluten free, vegetarian, etc.
 - Ensure your attendees with specific special food requirements have a ticket that distinguishes what they have requested that they can give to the banquet staff.
 - I prefer a ticket vs. some distinction on their badge which is not visible to the banquet staff
 - If it is a multi- meal or multi-day event I like to both color code the tickets as well as print on them the day and the type of food restriction. This assists in not having individuals offer tickets to their seatmate and lowers confusion in the kitchen with large meal services

Education

- Ensure that the banquet staff understand:
 - The ticket and/or color system being used so they don't pick up the wrong one
 - Have a planned script for the staff if someone asks for a special meal who does not have a ticket
 - Make sure everyone knows both what the items are that are being served, especially on a buffet, but what the ingredients are. This could be the difference between a trip to the ER or not

Be Creative

- Don't settle for what you did last time, the idea is to have these individuals have as good a meal experience as everyone else
 - Go on Pinterest to gather ideas to toss out to the Chef

- Ask your member with the dietary restriction what their most memorable meal was they were served the last time at a catered event.
- Ask them what disappoints them most when they are at a catered event regarding their dietary restrictions

Information is Powerful

- The more you know the better position you will be in to have creative menus developed on your attendees behalf
 - Keep records every year of what the special meal requests were and what the actual of each were served
 - Don't make someone with a dietary requirement feel like a Leper. It is more and more common to have some type of restriction, so let's not point them out as if they have two heads.
- Researchers estimate that up to 15 million Americans have food allergies
- While only eight foods (milk, egg, peanut, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, wheat, and soy) account for approximately 90 percent of all food-allergic reactions, a person can be allergic to virtually any food.
- Peanut allergy is one of the most common food allergies
- Peanuts are not the same as tree nuts (almonds, cashews, walnuts, etc.), which grow on trees.
- Between 5% and 10% of all people may suffer from a gluten sensitivity of some form
- 7.3 Million Americans Are Vegetarians

Thank you for your participation!