

## MAKING MEETINGS EXTRAORDINARY

By Debbie Locklear

Taking ordinary activities at a meeting and doing them extraordinarily well can add excitement, generate more interest and increase productivity among attendees. Using some creativity and keeping current with the industry makes a difference in the amount of excitement, interest and productivity among the participants.

Listed below are several suggestions on ways to make the ordinary extraordinary.



Arrange for nightly “turndown” service for overnight guests. While this service is fairly standard, it can be an exciting tool of communication. Send a note with information about the next day’s activities with a plate of cookies and a glass of milk. Reinforce the theme of the meeting with specially designed chocolates wrapped and placed on a pillow.

If your meeting lasts for more than one night, the excitement this surprise creates is an automatic topic of conversation. Providing opportunities for attendees to interact is vital to the success of the meeting.



A coffee break can lack imagination – the same old soft drinks, coffee and sweet roll syndrome. Budget constraints can play a role in how extraordinary the break is, but with a little preplanning and assistance from the facility, some energy and excitement can take place. It is a *break* – a time to refresh the mind and body.

If the budget will not permit the purchase of extra break items, arrange to have the luncheon dessert served during the break. This simple alteration is a refreshing and pleasant treat for attendees.

For a psychological change, have the hotel decorate the break table with greenery, flowers or perhaps a décor that will compliment the items being served.

Just for fun, have the soft drink cans displayed so they spell out the organization’s name or logo. This will never fail to generate conversations.

During breaks, try serving items such as fruit, ice cream bars, cookies and milk or yogurt. The change will aid in the relaxation of the attendees which will allow them to use the break as a refresher.

To energize the attendees, incorporate a stretch break conducted by a fitness expert into your program. This will increase their level of productivity during the next portion of the meeting and is added at little or no extra cost.



To meeting planners, keeping up with what's "hot" goes beyond being a mere avocation – it's an essential part of the job. These days, more meetings include a special event than ever before. Theme parties are especially popular and change in design faster than hemlines.

Some favorite theme ideas that encourage interaction are Monte Carlo nights. This type of high-energy activity will allow each attendee to participate in a variety of activities where they feel most comfortable.

Movie Star Parties (with real stars or with impersonators) create a fantasy atmosphere that relaxes attendees after a long day. An audience can be entertained and allowed to participate in a "Name That Star" contest, with prizes for the winners. "Look-A-Like" contests can be successfully conducted when advance notification and specific instructions are given to attendees.

Themed event ideas are plentiful and more planners are beginning to recognize the benefits and impact these activities have on the attendees. In order to be sure your event or theme is right for your organization, a few things should be considered. These considerations are what help to create an activity that is best suited for your audience.

1. What is the purpose of the event?
2. Determine what the objective is – What do you want to happen because of this event?
3. What are the ages of the attendees?
4. What percentage of the attendees are men, women or children?
5. What is the profession of the attendees?
6. Is the facility capable of accommodating your needs for the event?
7. How much time is available for the event?
8. How much set-up time do you have?
9. What is the budget for the event?

With all of this information gathered in advance, you should have an easy time identifying the perfect event for your group. This is a procedure many planners do not give enough attention to. Information gathering will set you apart from the amateurs.



Another area that can be inconvenient and annoying to attendees is the on-site registration process. While long lines are often unavoidable, the wait can be made enjoyable. Incorporate one of these ideas into your next program and observe a more relaxed, happy attendee.

Arrange to have a strolling magician in the registration area. The sleight of hand entertainment will help the attendees forget about the inconvenience.

You may want to try a music group, possibly a small choir from a high school. The result is the same. The distraction keeps the attendees' minds off of the fact that they are standing in line.

These ideas are effective, but consideration should also be given to the placement of the registration area. Logistically, the registration table or counter should be easy to see. Have the group name clearly identified, allow for free flowing movement of attendees, and have the area staffed adequately.

If you have not made the effort to accommodate your attendees in every possible fashion, the endless complaints will haunt you.

To be successful in the meeting planning industry, be creative, know your resources and ask if your suppliers can do anything that your imagination can create. You may come up with winning ideas for you, your organization and the attendees.