

# Corporate Incentive Travel

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

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## Without Skimping On Quality

One of Wyndham's Incentive Meetings & Events programs partners with Liquid Architecture, a beverage consultancy that stages drink-making activities as a teambuilding exercise.

Photo courtesy of Wyndham Hotels and Resorts

By Cynthia Kincaid

The current economic downturn is challenging event planners as perhaps no other time in history. Still, putting together a successful catered event is quite possible. All it will take is some creative thinking, a little flexibility and a bit of teamwork to pull it off.

"People are being more cost-conscious, but they still want to put on nice events and represent their companies appropriately," said Bill Scanlon, senior vice president of sales at Wyndham Hotels and Resorts.

And despite the current economy, attendees still expect flavorful foods in a pleasing presentation, said Judith Miller, CEO of The Judith Miller Group. "In your programs, content may be outstanding, the location superb, but if the food is bad, that is all your attendees will remember," she emphasized.

### 1. Alternative Portion Sizing And Creative Ordering

Fernando Salazar, vice president of food and beverage at Wyndham Hotels and Resorts, oversees a team devoted to creating meals that are inspiring, but cost effective. Planners looking to do the same should consider incorporating alternative cuts of meat into their menu planning. "Braised short

**"The square footage is higher on a Friday and Saturday night, so if you do it on, say, a Thursday, we can**



ribs are exquisite, and they are great options, especially for banquets, because they keep heat well and don't dry out," he said. They can be a welcomed and more inexpensive alternative to steak."

**possibly work on a better price, or a free reception, or an upgrade on the food."**

Fernando Salazar, Vice President of Food and Beverage, Wyndham Hotels and Resorts Parsippany, NJ



Creative planners also can choose a smaller cut of meat, rather than reducing quality. "Rather than a 9-ounce chicken breast, you can do a 6 or 7-ounce chicken breast," Salazar said. "You can still serve a quality piece of chicken, without going to an 8 or 9-ounce chicken breast of lower quality. We'd rather cut the portion and maintain the quality."

Perhaps one of the best-kept secrets in menu planning is finding out if a conference or event will be held right before your event and asking to piggyback onto the order. "Ask your director of conference services if you can get a better rate if you order the same food they are ordering," said Miller. "They will know you know what you are talking about [as a planner], and they'll be happy to do it."

## 2. Order On Consumption

Rather than automatically ordering food and drink in bulk, think about ordering on consumption. "If you're ordering something on consumption, it means you only pay for what you actually use," said Karl Baur, CMP, project director for RDL enterprises. "The hotel can resell sodas, bottled water and bags of chips if you don't use them."

People tend to eat much of what they can see, so Baur also caps how many items to put out. "I tell the hotel I am ordering this many bags of chips and no more, so if people use them up, please don't put more out," he said. It can be a clever way to offer food without breaking the bank.

Nearby restaurants, or the hotel lobby restaurant, also can be a great, and less expensive, opportunity to feed people. "I call the hotel restaurant, and before anybody can get in there and make changes, or tell me it's not available, I book it," said Sherry Parks, CEO for Corporate Planners Unlimited Inc. "I do a hosted menu with two or three selections and an open beer-and-wine opportunity. I can get a great dinner menu for \$25 a person inclusive, and since hotel restaurants are typically not full every night, they are happy to do it."



**Onsite herbs are in: A chef picks them fresh from a working garden at Rosen Shingle Creek, Orlando, FL.**

Photo courtesy of Rosen Hotels & Resorts

## 3. Rely On Local And Regional Resources

Providing food that is out of season, as most know, can be cost prohibitive and a waste of money. Not only will ordering in season save you money, it can also provide a way to boost the local farmers in the area, which offers a win to everyone.



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Judith Miller, CEO  
The Judith Miller Group  
Warwick, PA

relationships now," Miller noted. So find out if your venue has some kind of partnership with local growers and see what kinds of creative menus can be developed from these local offerings.

And don't always assume that expensive food is expensive everywhere. "If you do a meeting in Harpswell, Maine, lobster may very well be the cheapest thing on the menu," said Baur. "Look to see what's in the area you are going to."

## 4. Buffet Vs. Boxed Vs. Plated

In this new economic climate, some of the rules about food and drink pricing have changed. For

"The Four Seasons in Philadelphia has a huge connection to the Lancaster County Amish community," said Miller. They provide the hotel with free-range chickens, organic vegetables and produce. In turn, the hotel not only pays them, but also gives the Amish the oil that comes out of the kitchen for use in their tractors. "They have that whole eco-circle going really well, and a lot of people are developing those

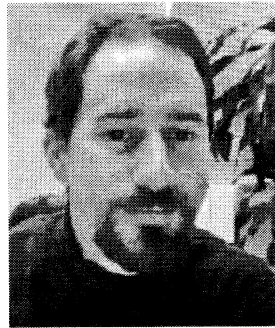
instance, in some locations, the buffet can be a more creative and inexpensive way to feed event attendees, and in other places, the plated lunch or dinner is a more creative and cost conscious way to go. "Generally, for a small group, plated will be cheaper, but not always," said Baur. "Look at each option that is available and see which one gets the most value for the dollar."

"You might have to put out 15 to 20 percent more in a buffet when you don't know what people are going to go for," said Miller. "You've also got to have a backup in case people are really hungry and you've under-ordered."

Salazar noted that plated dinners allow for more control of food costs, and the service and presentation tend to be better. "I'm an advocate of sit-down lunches or dinners, rather than buffets, because food can be maintained at an optimum temperature and quality," he said.

Boxed lunches can lend themselves to more creativity because of their open-ended nature. Just about anything from sandwiches to wraps to salads can be included in a myriad of options and tastes. However, noted Baur, they may not necessarily be the best economic choice.

"They are actually one of the most expensive items you can order because of the high labor costs of putting them together," he said. "We put on one event where the box dinner actually ended up costing more than a sit-down dinner. You have to pay someone to put all of those meals together."



**"We put on one event where the box dinner actually ended up costing more than a sit-down dinner. You have to pay someone to put all of those meals together."**

Karl Baur, CMP, Project Director  
RDL Enterprises  
Sacramento, CA

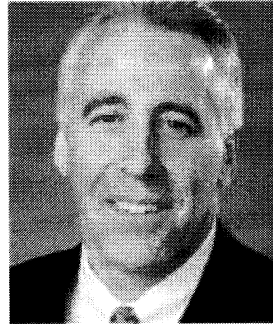
## 5. Alcohol With A Twist

While alcohol can be a budget-breaker, it also can add to a meal's creativity without breaking the bank. Simply limiting the kinds and amounts of liquor available can keep things in line, without people feeling they are being deprived.

One recommendation Miller has is to ask for broken cartons. In other words, did another venue pay for several cartons of bottled wine or beer and not drink them all? Sometimes you can offer to take

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Bill Scanlon, Senior V.P. of Sales  
Wyndham Hotels and Resorts  
Parsippany, NJ



the one or two remaining bottles without having to pay a higher price for the entire carton.

Baur is also seeing more alcohol being offered through a cash bar. "When they have to pay for it themselves, it cuts down on how much people need to drink real quick," he noted. "Talk to your convention services manager about how they are going to bill you for the drinks. If they pour even one glass, you've bought the bottle, so tell them you never want more than

two bottles open at a time."

Keeping quality in place but costs down on mixed drinks can be achieved by starting an evening with quality liquors, but switching to less expensive brands an hour or two into the event. Guests rarely notice such a switch.

If the group is small enough, Salazar said, you can also provide more expensive quality wines by offering half, rather than full, bottles. "People would rather drink a quality half bottle of wine than drink a cheap full bottle," he said.

And in a relatively new twist, organic wines and liquors are starting to make their way to dining and buffet tables. These liquors, produced from organic vegetables and grains, offer the same great taste at comparable prices. "More people are aware of the environment and being green conscious and environmentally friendly," noted Salazar. "People pay more attention to organic cocktails than a traditional cocktail. We are also adding organic wines that are made from sustainable farming practices."

## 6. Talk To The Chef

In terms of creativity and unique food ideas, the chef can be your best friend. "Go to your convention services manager or chef and say, 'Here's my budget,' and have them help you come up

with a menu,” said Baur. “Make him or her a part of the process. It’s their specialty, why not use that resource?”

He added, “There are chefs that have taken it as a matter of pride to do something really good for me because I went to them and placed myself in their hands.”

Miller couldn’t agree more. “Chefs love to get involved, and most of the time they are full of ideas,” she said.

Outside catering departments are also veritable fonts of useful and creative menu ideas. “They can be your greatest asset in terms of finding what is inexpensive to serve, and they are good at taking mundane items and making them appealing to eat,” said Baur.

## 7. Work With The Hotels

With profit margins squeezed, and food costs rising, both hotels and companies are taking a hard look at their bottom lines. This doesn’t have to impact the creativity of a catered event, but it does require more cost comparisons — and negotiating.

“I had a hotel that wanted to charge \$9 a person for chips and guacamole,” said Parks. “If I had ordered it through the dry snack selection on the room service menu, I could have gotten it for around six bucks. I’ve seen \$95 for a gallon of coffee. People are pulling up their bootstraps and saying, ‘I’m not paying \$95 for a gallon of coffee. I’ll set up an account at the coffee bar in the lobby.’?”

She added, “Sometimes, holding an international meeting is less expensive than a domestic meeting because hotels in the U.S. have become comfortable in surcharging every last thing.”

The point is, in today’s harsh economic climate, everything is negotiable. You can have creativity — even downright inspiration — if you are willing to stay flexible, give a little, and give a little back.

“Hotels can only cut so far before it becomes nonviable for them,” Baur noted. “I’m looking for the best deal that I can get for my client, but if I make it too good, the hotel is not going to ever want me back, and they are going to fight me on anything else that I want to do with them.”

Wyndham’s Bill Scanlon reminds us that hotels want everyone to win. “Because of our economic circumstances, the planner has stringent limitations and the hotel has stringent limitations,” he said. “So it’s truly the ability to partner, and partner effectively, that gets everybody’s needs met.”

## 8. Be Creative With Budgets

All of which brings us to budgeting. With the economic climate the way it is, budgeting needs to become as creative as the event itself.

“For any program, there is a way to tailor everything because you can adjust all of the elements to help meet their needs,” said Ken Smith, general manager for Access Destination Services, Palm Desert, CA. “Everyone now is willing to change their fee structure because they need the business, and a lot of places are trying to fill up their spaces to keep their employees. Hotels are willing to sit down and really talk because they want to have the revenue come through the property, even if it’s just to cover overhead.”

Baur recommends, for instance, closely analyzing all-inclusive food packages as a way to save money. “There are a number of tricks that we do to help our clients get the most out of their food and beverage dollars,” he said. “And they work as well with a group of two dozen as they work for 300 to 400 to 1,000.” Many times, for instance, hotels will offer a breakfast package consisting of coffee, Danish, muffins, maybe hot chocolate.

“We know that our group only wants muffins and fruit, so I’m going to purchase just enough muffins and fruit to make that the right amount for my group,” Baur said. “So packaging is not always the best deal. If they have eight items in a package, and you only want three of them, why pay for the other five? If you’re looking to save money, I urge people to make the comparisons.”

Salazar also recommends holding an event on an off night, which is usually more inexpensive. The money can either be saved, or directed toward enhanced food and alcohol purchases. “The square footage is higher on a Friday and Saturday night, so if you do it on, say, a Thursday, we can possibly work on a better price, or a free reception, or an upgrade on the food,” he said.

Remember, everything is negotiable. “What are you willing to give up to get what you want, and what are they willing to give up to get what they want?” Baur asks. If done right, your event can be creative, and even more important, memorable. **C&IT**

### *How To Talk Turkey With The Catering Staff*

Whether you are putting on an event large or small, keeping the lines of communication open with hotel and catering staff can ensure that your event goes smoothly right from the start.

“When I’m working with the hotel, I make sure that I stay in regular contact with them,” said Karl Baur, CMP, project director for Sacramento-based RDL