# : Food

Budget for and select food (and caterer for off-site events), coordinate service. The same team might handle food at both the hotel and off-site events, or a separate Event Team might deal with off-site caterers.

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| ***Coordination Notes***  Be sure to check with:   * *Events –* to coordinate menus. * *Equipment/Meeting Rooms –* to be sure any necessary equipment for speakers is provided. * *Registration –* to be sure registration forms will provide meal selections and any special needs. * *Publications* – to produce any necessary signs, and to determine who will print tickets. * *Hotel/Caterer –* You will need to be fully familiar with what food and services are provided, the deadlines for guarantees, the schedule for serving, how they will handle any shortages, and who to contact with problems or questions. |

***Budgeting***

Cost estimates

Food service is the single largest part of meeting expenses. Therefore it will be necessary early on to try to accurately estimate food costs.

You will have to give your best estimate based on how many people you think will attend. You may want to develop two or more scenarios (e.g., cost for 100, cost for 120).

Complimentary meals may be authorized for some special guests or for vendors for events they sponsor. *(See Addendum to Budget chapter.)* Be sure to check with the Local Arrangements Chair (or President) and include any guests in your count and find out their meal choices.

Vendor-exhibitors should also be registered for the conference and complete a food form. If a vendor has more than one person, the vendor should complete a food form and pay for the extra meals for each additional person. Double check with the Exhibits Leader to make sure everyone is accounted for.

Hotel should be able to pick a date pretty early on by which they will guarantee prices. Use this information in budgets.

Prices for food are usually as listed + +. That is: price of food, plus service charge, plus tax (if applicable).

There should be a written contract with any off-site caterers. Hotel food service may be a part of hotel contract. Be sure you know what the contract covers.

The President will need a breakdown of food costs by meal to use in recruiting vendor sponsors. For example one vendor might donate an amount appropriate to sponsor opening luncheon; a smaller one might sponsor a break.

Taxes

Having a state tax exemption letter may save hundreds of dollars. MAALL is a not-for-profit corporation but it still may be necessary to apply for state tax exemption. Verify early on that MAALL has a state tax letter in the state of the conference. If not, the Treasurer will need to apply for one ASAP, as this process may take some time. *(See also Budget chapter.)*

Some locations may have local taxes that have to be paid even if MAALL is state tax exempt. The tax may be applied to the total price of food plus price of service charge.

Cost variations by meal type

Plated (served) meals are generally cheaper than buffets. Hors d'oeuvres are more expensive than meals!

See if the hotel has a "conference package" that covers several meals, especially for full day of conference (usually Friday).

Tipping

In working with off-site caterers, inquire about "usual practice" on tipping of servers. This may vary by location or caterer. Decide whether or not you will tip and, if so, include in cost estimate. Make arrangements to pay the tip at the time of the event unless the caterer wants it done another way. You may need to get cash from the Treasurer for the tip.

***Usual Meals***

The following are meals typically served at a MAALL conference (assuming Thursday noon start and Saturday noon end):

Thursday Opening luncheon (formal, sit-down luncheon with speaker)

Afternoon break

Evening off-site reception or dinner

[Note: At some conferences Thursday and Friday evening events have been switched.]

Friday Breakfast/business meeting

Morning break

Luncheon (formality and presence/absence of speaker varies year to year)

Afternoon break (if programs continuing throughout afternoon)

[Dinner is usually dine-arounds.]

Saturday Light breakfast (if not provided free by hotel)

Morning break (beverages only)

Box lunch

In holding two evening events, avoid having "grazing" (hors d'oeuvres only) both nights. One evening should be a sit down dinner. (Buffet is okay, as long as people can sit down to eat.)

***Food Selection***

Make sure to have vegetarian alternatives. For plated meals you will need separate vegetarian entrees; for buffets, make sure some selections are appropriate for vegetarians. (If possible, have a vegetarian on the Food Team or available for advice!) Keep in mind that not all vegetarians eat dairy products.

When offering a vegetarian or multiple options during a plated meal, work with the hotel on methods of determining who will be served which meal. Different colored meal tickets usually do the trick. *(See Tickets section below in this chapter for more details.)*

If there is a separate team handling evening events, coordinate so that you do not serve the same item(s) at lunch as are served that night for dinner.

The menus provided by the hotel are often not the only choices available. Work with the hotel staff to learn about alternatives, especially if there are no vegetarian choices on standard menus. The chef may also be available for consultation on alternatives to menu items.

Taste items before selecting them. Know that just because something holds up well and tastes good at a tasting with a small group, it may not be the best thing to serve to 75-100+ people. Ask the hotel staff–hopefully they will know what holds up well.

Avoid having breaks and meals that are too heavy. Provide some "healthy" choices–fruit, yogurt, granola bars etc.–not just cookies and brownies, bacon and eggs.

Include bottled water and plenty of diet soda as break beverage choices, also caffeine-free coffee and tea. If possible, include some caffeine-free sodas, fruit drinks and/or flavored waters.

***Special Dietary Needs***

Find out hotel’s willingness to work with special dietary needs. They may be willing to make a special meal for the few people who will need this.

Work with registration team early on to make sure there is a check-off box on the registration form for people to indicate that they have a special dietary need.

Contact individuals who indicate a special dietary need to find out what their needs are and then communicate them to the hotel.

***Guarantees***

One of the most difficult aspects of planning a conference is accurately estimating attendees for purposes of guaranteeing food.

The hotel and any off-site caterers will require a number of meals to "guarantee" several days before the conference. Be sure to know the guarantee dates.

MAALL must pay for the number of people guaranteed, regardless of whether they show up.

Generally, the hotel or caterer can accommodate *some* last minute additions. Ask how many or what percent. Accommodating additional diners is more difficult for plated meals than for buffets. This is especially critical for opening luncheon–have Registration inform you right away of unexpected late registrations.

The "safe" approach in meal counting is to assume that everyone will show up at a meal that is included in his/her registration costs. Inevitably, some people do not show up at some meals, but including them may help cover unexpected attendees.

Meal count factors to consider

Consider whether a lot of late, on-site registrations are expected. *(See Registration chapter for suggestions for encouraging pre-registration.)*

Find out whether there are a lot of local participants who may be less likely to attend breakfasts or evening events. (Do not assume–ask people and try to get a good estimate.)

People may be more likely to attend meal events that are in the hotel than off-site events, since they are convenient.

If you have a reception without a dinner, some people may treat the hors d'oeuvres as dinner.

Some people may be leaving the conference early. Typically, Saturday morning attendance is substantially lower than the rest of the conference. Therefore Saturday breakfast and lunch counts might be reduced, even though they are included in the registration fee. Ask Registration to include a check box for people to indicate whether they will need a lunch on Saturday.

Coordination with Registration Team

Communicate with the Registration Team to get the best possible counts.

Let Registration Team know what information will be needed for food planning (e.g. number and type meals, number attending full conference.)

If you are offering several menu options for particular meal(s), registrants should be asked to make their choices on the registration form

***Scheduling*** ***Meal Service***

Find out early on how long the hotel needs for a meal. (This will vary by buffet or “plated” meal and by how many people are served.) Pass this information on to the Education Chair for scheduling purposes.

Avoid having meal rushed to get to speaker, but it is also undesirable to have lengthy "dead time" between meal and program, or after the event and before next activity in conference schedule.

Be aware of whether there will be speakers at particular meals and how long they will need. This may affect decisions about plated versus buffet as well as room setup and scheduling. Make sure people are not trying to serve or get meal from a buffet while a speech or meeting is going on.

Ask the hotel to serve all diners at the same table as close together as possible; ask them not to serve all non-vegetarian meals to everyone in room first and then all vegetarian, or vice versa. This practice can result in some people left sitting unserved for a long time.

***Logistics***

Walk through the meeting areas before the conference and come to agreement with hotel on where food will be served.

Ask to have buffet lines go on both sides of tables, or have more than one serving station. This avoids long lines.

If possible, place break food near the vendors so that they are visited during breaks. However, balance this against amount of space available. If it would be too congested, break may be better off elsewhere.

Someone will have to review the food bill daily and sign for it. Make sure someone from the Food Team has been authorized by MAALL to sign at the hotel.

Make sure hotel knows in advance the meal room setups and times that are needed.

If the meal or break has a vendor sponsor, ask the Publications Team to make signs acknowledging sponsorship.

Make sure Equipment and Meeting Rooms Team knows about any equipment needs for speakers at meals.

President should determine seating for head table; ask Publications Team to prepare name plates.

Consider whether or not there will be centerpieces on tables and who will make or pay for them. These are nice, but optional. Souvenir centerpieces with a local theme are often popular, though large, bulky ones can be a problem for air travelers. If used, determine a method to determine who wins the centerpiece and be sure to inform the President or whoever is presiding at the meal.

***Tickets***

Decide which meals/events will require tickets, and who will collect them.

Coordinate with Registration and Publications to be sure tickets are provided for meals/events that need them, and who will print them.

It is especially important to provide and use tickets for plated meals which have both multiple choices (including vegetarian and non-vegetarian.) Diners should place their tickets on the table so servers will know who gets which entree. Switching at the last minute cannot be allowed, as the hotel may run out of one of the entrees!

Each menu choice ticket should be a different color.

***During the Conference***

Watch EVERYTHING.

Notify hotel contact immediately if there is a problem.

Make sure that all items that were supposed to be served get served. Little things can go wrong. Was ice served with the soda? Was hot tea put out with the coffee and decaf coffee?

Is the break being set up in the proper location and at the proper time?

Are the meal rooms properly set up? For example, is head table needed for the Thursday luncheon taken down the next day?

**Food Samples**

Meal selection form (from registration form), Omaha 2013

Catering contract for Saturday at law school, St. Louis 2012