

No More Naptime

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By Steve Swafford

It's every meeting planner's fear. After you've knocked yourself out to assign just the right topic to just the right speaker, you peek into the session room for a quick check and hear... snoring. The audience's attention span—and all your hard work—is no match for the sleep-inducing effects of a warm, dim room right after a heavy lunch.

Your scintillating sessions shouldn't fall victim to digest-and-doze, says Steve Swafford, balance warrior with Leadership Outfitters in Santa Monica, California. To avoid this nightmare scenario, you must think beyond topics and speakers to how food, timing, lighting, and room set-up affect your audience.

Swafford will cover this subject at a session called "Creating Events with Energy and Pizzazz" on December 5 at the Great Ideas Conference in Orlando and on February 27 in San Diego, both presented by ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership. Based on a recent interview with *Meetings & Expositions Online*, here's a sampling of his thoughts on how to keep your attendees from nodding off—or sneaking out.

What's your best advice for meeting planners who want to help attendees stay awake and pay attention?

You have to look at the whole picture. There are so many factors, and the issue is not just the content. It's also the time of day, how the content flows, the lighting, and nutritional aspects of what you serve to eat.

For example, think about the nutritional angle. What are you giving folks that will keep them alert as opposed to putting them to sleep? One thing I'll do in my session is take apart a typical deli plate lunch—potato chips, ham, salami, turkey, bread—and talk about what it is about this that makes your blood sugar crash. We don't realize how much junk we put out.

I'm not saying you have to serve nothing but granola, but it is useful to do a reality check on what you're offering. [For detailed advice on food and other factors, see "[Resources for Wide-Awake Meetings.](#)"]

How much of a factor is the size of a session?

At the beginning of the day, a large general session can be OK as a gathering tool. But the content should be provocative, and it should relate to the breakouts and give the audience an incentive to find out what breakouts they want to go to next.

At last year's Great Ideas Conference in Orlando, they set up the general-session room creatively. The audience came in and found there were several different room sets. In one area, there was a board room set for 12. In another, there was a classroom for 15, elsewhere there were round tables, and so on. People could self-select the learning environment they felt most comfortable in.

That conference had something else I thought was cool: 30-minute "sunshine breaks" between sessions. I don't know how practical 15-minute breaks are anymore, given the 24/7 obsession with Blackberries. Thirty-minute breaks are great for making phone calls, talking to peers, and figuring out where to go next.

What if the meeting planner, or the speaker, or both, don't realize there's a problem until they're on site?

You have to read the audience every step of the way—which means you have to be willing to be flexible according to the needs of the group.

I once had a program on creative education environments where we were stuck in a dimly lit room with no windows after lunch. So I said to the meeting planners: I know everyone's going to have a sugar crash in the middle of this, at the 2 o'clock witching hour. Can we go out by the pool? We had a small group of 30 folks, and there was a gazebo out there with round tables. We went outside, and it worked perfectly.

That brings up an interesting question: What do you think is the perfect meeting environment?

I don't know that it's perfect, but one of the better environments would be to have different-shaped tables in different configurations. You'd have easy access for laptops, good sounds, and strong lighting that could be easily adjusted. And people would be able to move around. I once read that when a church becomes 80 percent full every week, that's when the church's growth stops—people are not comfortable if they feel they no longer have breathing room.

It should be easy to get up within the room for drinks and snacks. Oh, and we'd have music for the beginning of the meeting—not loud or obnoxious, but enough so that no one comes into the silent room and thinks, "Am I the only one here?"

What's the ideal time of day?

I'm not a morning person, but I do think that speaking in the 8 to 10 a.m. block is best. The second best is probably 3 to 5 p.m., followed by a reception. Some people think that time slot is bad, but really, it all depends on the group. If the people are fairly young and new to their careers, and if they don't have to run home afterward, it can be good to allocate 3 to 5 p.m. for education, and then they can look forward to socializing and networking afterward.

As a speaker, how often do you get a perfect environment?

I don't think I ever do. I just have to make the best of it. But we all have to make sure we never lose sight of the importance of fluidity. That will kill the energy of any group.

To learn more about "Creating Events with Energy and Pizzazz"—Swafford's Great Ideas Conference session at 10:30 a.m. December 5 in Orlando and 10:30 a.m. February 27 in San Diego—click [here](#).

- Meeting room sets to encourage adult learning:
www.pcma.org/publications/AdultsLearn/roomsets1.htm
- Case studies on how to change a less-than-ideal meeting setting:
www.pcma.org/publications/AdultsLearn/flexdesign1.htm
- Suggestions from the Centers for Disease Control on making healthier food and beverage choices for meetings:
http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/pdf/Healthy_Worksite_Food.pdf
- Guidelines to promote healthy F&B and physical activity on site:
www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/prevent/guidelines.htm
- Tips to avoid mid-afternoon slump:
<http://channels.apollolife.com/show.asp?NewAid=11593>