

Why Event Organizers Should Get Behind the **Wellness Movement**





Wellness is officially a thing. Look no further than the Fitbit-clad wrists of the millions of weekend warriors to realize that health is mainstream. In fact, a 2014 report from the Global Wellness Institute estimates that the global wellness market is worth US\$3.4 trillion. Like anything that captures the imagination of consumers (think social media and smartphones), meetings, conferences and trade shows will eventually get on board.



BY MICHELLE BRUNO

There are lots of reasons why meeting planners should, as mindfulness educators say, “navigate the flow instead of the resistance.”

Wearable fitness monitors are only a small part of the growing wellness lifestyle. Branded workouts such as Crossfit, SoulCycle, Barre and P90X are all the rage. Yoga, sound baths and mindfulness meditation practices show

no signs of slowing down. Standup desks, treadmill desks and inflatable balls (for desk chairs) have infiltrated the workplace. Eating and drinking habits range from gluten-free, sugar-free, organic, vegetarian, pescatarian, vegan and veggan (eats eggs) diets to coconut water, green juices and kombucha (fermented tea).

Connecting the Community

With wellness becoming so ingrained in the consumer psyche, it’s only natural that mind-body-spirit activities would emerge organically in some meetings. The World Domination Summit (WDS) is the brainchild of author, traveler and lover of the unconventional, Chris Guillebeau.

It’s “a summit for independent-minded thinkers mostly around the idea of how to live a remarkable life in a conventional world,” says Guillebeau’s wife and summit co-founder, Jolie Guillebeau, fixer and voice of reason for WDS.

It was Jolie Guillebeau’s idea to have a highly sensitive person lounge installed at every WDS. The idea came about from a discussion between Chris and Jolie, both introverts. While going over the tasks that each needed to accomplish during the first summit, they expressed their individual needs for some down time. The two decided to look at how their preferences could also benefit others. “Our goal for including the lounge is to encourage those people that might otherwise go back to their hotel rooms and isolate themselves to find that rest and rejuvenation within our community,” Jolie says.

The accoutrements of the lounge are usually pretty simple, Jolie explains. In 2015, it was located inside one of the host hotels—steps away from the main gathering spaces of the event. Hammocks on stands allowed attendees to wrap themselves up in cocoons to create personal spaces in which to read or relax. Reading lamps replaced the fluorescent lights. Beanbag chairs and rugs were available for those preferring to sit or meditate. In the past,

seated massages were also a fixture.

Wellness is a collaborative effort at WDS. Participants infuse wellness into the event through the many attendee-led meetups on exercise and nutrition that take place every year. Organizers have hosted breakfasts in juice bars, featured Jadah Sellner of Simple Green Smoothies as a keynote speaker and extended a perennial invitation to Steve Camb of Nerd Fitness to lead exercise classes. A 5K run is held every year, and two years ago WDS attendees set a Guinness World Record for the longest yoga chain.

Besides the intangible benefits that accrue from “working to honor all members of the WDS community,” Jolie admits that there are other reasons to pay attention to wellness. “The last thing we want for our attendees is to feel exhausted or overwhelmed at the end of the weekend. We want them to leave feeling energized.”

Leveraging Revenue Streams

The demand for wellness activities can also open the door to sponsorship revenue. San Francisco-based 3D Media Group Promotions offers a number of pre-packaged wellness-themed brand activations. One of the most popular offerings is a pedometer contest. The firm provides the pedometers and access to a mobile website, where participants can read the rules, access the sponsor’s social

a Doctor of Behavioral Science and Health degree from the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto. She also has degrees in exercise and health studies, and physical education, as well as 25 years of experience in researching health, exercise and aging. Her firm, Exercise Bytes, based in Washington, D.C., creates fitness/stretch videos and wellness lounges for conferences, trade shows and workplaces.

In addition to mind-body videos, Dr. Kim’s Wellness Lounge (featured at IAEE’s Expo! Expo! Annual Meeting and Exhibition 2015) provides wellness education, tip sheets, on-the-go fitness breaks, one-on-one wellness coaching, wellness challenges, a wellness wall or tip board and a mind-body zone. Meditation and yoga classes are delivered via noise-cancelling headphones “to create a private, intimate and beautiful experience.” All of the activities are designed for people in business clothing. “The goal is to combat sitting fatigue and learning fatigue,” she explains.

Meetings aren’t the healthiest environments, Dr. Kim says. Because humans can only retain information in 10-minute intervals, requiring attendees to stay seated for an hour or two without moving is counterproductive. Brief breaks designed to pump oxygen to the brain and blood to the working muscles are effective for boosting energy, alertness and retention, especially when they’re taken in the

her to facilitate a breakout session as part of the event’s overall focus on wellness. At the 2015 event, she presided over a meditation room. In one section of the room, outfitted with Bose headphones, Papa gave guided mindfulness meditations. In another area, she delivered mindfulness training. In three days, she taught 15 classes, presented in multiple breakout sessions on the trade show floor and delivered a keynote on “How to Live and Lead Mindfully.”

The growing focus on wellness at conferences and trade shows makes complete sense to Papa. “Attendees are dealing with multiple stressors—jet lag, travel issues, toxins, lack of sleep, alcohol, stress over getting work done and problems at home. People are on sensory overload,” she explains. By simply putting in a meditation room and providing multiple 20- to 30-minute mindfulness meditations throughout the day, “attendees get stress relief, sleep better and aren’t drawn to the toxins because they’re feeling better, more connected and more grounded,” Papa says.

Planners who can’t devote the space or the resources to have a separate area for mindfulness practice aren’t out of luck. “The foundation of mindfulness can be added to any activity, whether it’s team-building activities or healthy eating,” Papa says. Because of this flexibility, she can combine mindfulness with any topic or engage in mindfulness practices with groups of any size—from a small gathering of executives to thousands of attendees at a trade show.

Championing Healthful Habits

Food is another component of wellness. It has received more focus in recent years because of the growing number of food allergies and dietary preferences, and due to evangelism by educators such as Tracy Stuckrath, a food and beverage specialist and trainer. As founder and chief connector at Thrive! Meetings and Events, Stuckrath speaks on a number of food wellness topics. In her presentation, “Using Food to Energize and Engage Your Audience,” she describes how nutrition contributes to the participation and outlook of attendees and provides guidance on how to plan menus that improve learning, memory and mood.

A number of guides to healthy eating at events have been published. Authors of *The Healthy Meeting and Event Guide* from the University of California at Berkeley write, “Food and beverages served [at events] are

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media channel and report their step totals.

3D also offers a Lifestyle Studio, a relaxation space where attendees are exposed to education on stress management, soft music, aromatherapy, nap pods and at-your-desk yoga. The company’s Health Challenge is a “circuit” consisting of four activities designed to test participants mentally and physically during the event. The Water Bar is a lounge featuring a variety of colorful fruit-infused waters. All of the promotions provide opportunities for sponsor exposure from signage to branded cups to printed exercise tip sheets.

Helping Attendees Learn

Event organizers that are truly serious about wellness may want to call in the big guns. Kim Bercovitz, Ph.D. (she goes by Dr. Kim), holds

afternoon when attendees are at their lowest energy levels. A minute-and-a-half focus on deep breathing and relaxation makes people feel as if they’ve slept for an hour.

Teaching a Lifelong Skill

While “mind body spirit” is a bit of a catch-all phrase, speaker, author and mindfulness trainer Lee Papa is very clear about mindfulness as a standalone practice that differs from meditation and relaxation. “Mindfulness is essentially, awareness. It’s about paying attention to what is going on in your internal world and your external world with no judgment or attachment,” Papa says.

Papa’s attention turned to trade shows and conferences in 2014, when the organizers of the IMEX America exhibition invited

often high in unhealthy fats, added sugars and salt, while low in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Additionally, meetings and events involve a lot of sitting, which is not only bad for our health, but also can reduce participants' energy, concentration and productivity." The guide recommends right-sized portions, phys-

walkshops (presenting a topic while walking) are "social icebreakers and ways to level the playing field among attendees."

Lee Papa encourages attendees to take what they learn home with them. "When they leave, they're still engaged. Mindfulness reduces stress, absenteeism and presenteeism

beginning to gain momentum. The growing interest in mind, body and spirit programs can be attributed to any number of things: stress in the workplace, the recent recession, Millennials' preferences for healthier lifestyles (and there are more of them in the workforce than ever before) or the impact of processed foods on society. Whatever the reason, Dr. Kim believes there is a wellness movement afoot in meetings.

"Wellness activities in meetings started with early morning walks, runs and yoga. They have evolved into stretch breaks during the conference and wellness challenges integrated into an app. I believe it will progress to a more comprehensive experience," Dr. Kim says. She envisions that event organizers will make more of an effort before and after the event to promote wellness. Until then, organizers that offer attendees a little stretch or a snooze in a nap pod during the meeting are ahead of the curve. ■

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ical activity, vegetables and fruit, water, whole grains, healthy fats and proteins, as well as limits on sugar and salt.

Wellness and mind-body-spirit programs provide benefits for meeting planners beyond the immediate improvement in attendee performance or potential revenue streams. "Health and wellness instruction allows attendees to learn how to take care of themselves, so they can take care of their clients," Dr. Kim says. In addition, videos and brief exercise interludes are good ways to occupy audience members waiting for a speaker to begin. Group exercise, fitness challenges and

(showing up, but not being fully present). It allows [mindfulness practitioners] to use fewer resources, less effort and less time for a more abundant return. You can choose not to attend to it, but you can't unlearn it," she explains. Part of Papa's business offering is to help attendees post-meeting by designing a mindfulness program or space in their workplaces.

Recognizing An Opportunity

While some elements of wellness, such as food and nutrition, were adopted by event planners more quickly than others, exercise, meditation, mindfulness and quiet time are

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