



UNVEILING THE APPETITE FOR CHANGE

The Imperative for Addressing Food Waste Resulting From Professional Meetings and Events

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Within the United States, nearly 40 percent of the 235 million tons in our food supply goes unsold or uneaten, with only a small portion of what is eligible for repurposing being donated or recycled. More specifically, ReFED estimates that 33 percent, or 78 million tons of food, goes to waste destinations.¹ Professional meetings and events significantly contribute to this problem, as during and after meticulously planned events, staggering amounts of food are needlessly wasted. Every buffet, gala dinner, and coffee break becomes an opportunity for excess, with uneaten delicacies and untouched platters quietly discarded.

Despite this stark reality, various studies show high percentages of meeting planners are concerned about hosting sustainable meetings.²

This raises questions about where the disconnect is occurring and how to solve the significant problem of food waste at events. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) collaborated with Astrapto, a sustainability consultancy, along with its re-

search partner, Richard Garlick and Associates, LLC, to survey 553 meeting planners regarding their attitudes toward food waste prevention. All planners recruited to participate in the online survey were carefully vetted to ensure their representation of the larger business event planner community. Planners in the study averaged 20 events per year, with an average attendance of 366 people, and indicated that at least 75 percent of their events involved working with a food caterer.

The findings reveal a compelling narrative: most planners and their clientele acknowledge food waste as a significant industry problem, expressing a genuine desire to combat it. Surprisingly, however, proactive suggestions from venues to prevent food waste remain scarce, despite clear demand from planners and clients alike. This white paper seeks to unpack these findings, shedding light on the gap between intention and action in addressing food waste in professional gatherings, and proposing actionable strategies for industry stakeholders to bridge this divide.

¹ <https://refed.org/food-waste/the-problem/>

² <https://meetings.skift.com/event-statistics/>

The demand for food waste prevention solutions is high for both meeting planners and their clients

Ninety percent of planners say their clients believe in and promote sustainable meetings (Figure 1). Fifty-five percent said food waste prevention was a “very high priority” for their clients, and another 33 percent said it gets “considered” although it is “secondary to other issues.” The planners themselves feel an even stronger personal commitment

to sustainability, with 65 percent describing sustainability as a “very important” concern.

Proactive conversations regarding food waste prevention would be exceedingly well received by planners and result in greater planner loyalty (Figure 2a). An overwhelming majority (92 percent) of meetings planners surveyed would respond favorably if a venue proactively brought up the topic of food waste prevention and offered possible solutions (Figure 2b). Even more importantly, 82 percent would be more likely to reuse a venue in the future under these conditions.

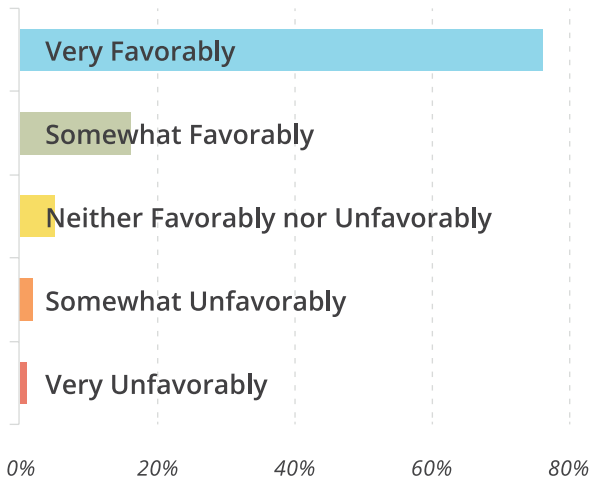
FIGURE 1. PRIORITIZATION OF SUSTAINABILITY AND FOOD WASTE PREVENTION AMONG CLIENTS AND PLANNERS



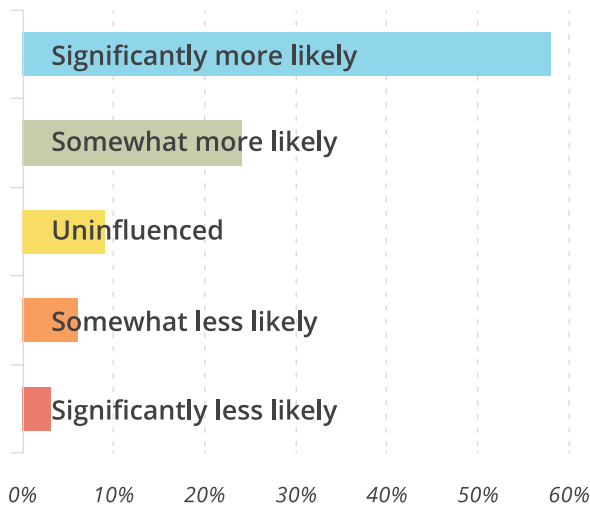
Proactive conversations regarding food waste prevention would be overwhelmingly well-received by planners and result in greater planner loyalty

FIGURE 2. PERCEPTION OF PROACTIVE ENGAGEMENT ON FOOD WASTE BY VENUE CONTACTS

2A. If a venue contact with whom you are working proactively brought up the topic of food waste and offered possible solutions, how would you view this?



2B. If a venue contact proactively brought up the topic of food waste prevention and offered possible solutions, would it make you more likely or less likely to use the venue in the future?

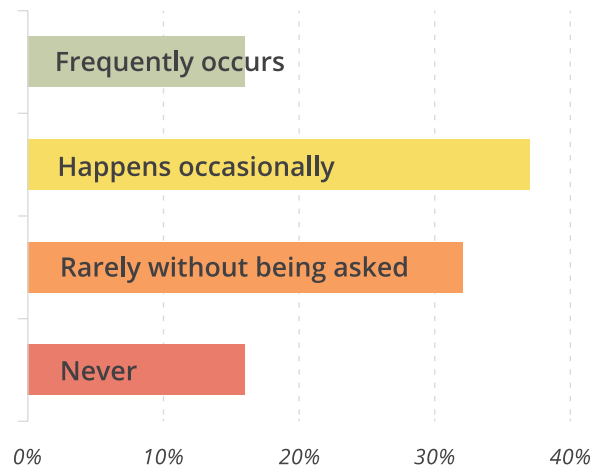


Despite the demand, proactive conversations regarding food waste prevention by venues rarely occur

Only 16 percent said their venues “frequently” bring up food waste prevention, while another 37 percent said venues will “occasionally” proactively raise the subject (Figure 3). Only 45 percent of planners themselves report “frequently” raising the topic in their conversations with venues. Clearly, there is a gap between the presumed priority given to the topic of food waste prevention and the amount to which the subject is raised in the conversations planners have with their venues.

FIGURE 3. RECALLED INSTANCES OF VENUES PROACTIVELY ADDRESSING FOOD WASTE BY OFFERING SOLUTIONS WITHOUT PRIOR PROMPTING

To your recollection, has a venue ever proactively brought up solutions to reduce food waste without you raising the issue first?



Sixty percent of planners who bring up food waste have experienced some type of resistance from venues; 60 percent of the time this induces planners to use a different venue for future events.

When asked why more conversations don't occur, 91 percent listed "not wanting to run out of food" as either a "major" or "minor" reason, followed by 87 percent who believe catering managers want to sell as much food as possible. Eighty-five percent acknowledged that, in many cases, both the planner and the venue are focused on so many other topics that the subject of food waste prevention gets ignored.

According to the planners in the study, the reasons why conversations around food waste prevention do not occur more often can be summarized by the following:

- lack of awareness or education about the issue of food waste and its importance
- resistance to change or extra effort required to implement food waste reduction strategies
- ignorance or lack of knowledge among catering managers or venue staff about the severity of food waste and the importance of prevention
- prioritization of image, sales, and profitability over sustainability concerns
- a perception that addressing food waste is a liberal or politically charged issue, leading to avoidance of discussions
- concerns about potential discomfort or embarrassment associated with the topic
- fear of liability issues related to donating leftover food to food banks
- financial considerations, including the desire to meet food and beverage minimum requirements or concerns about profitability

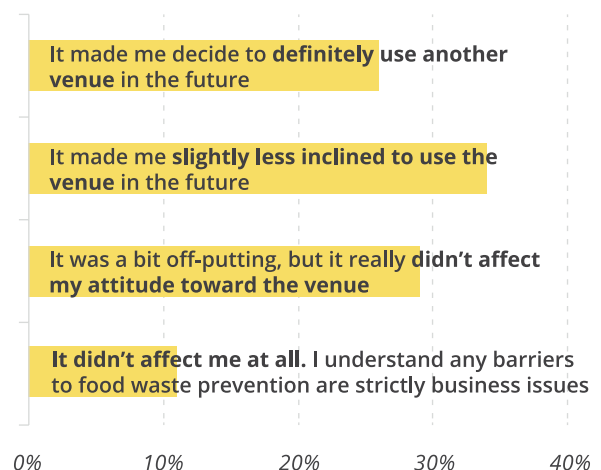
Planners often encounter active resistance to food waste conversations

Sixty percent of planners who raised the topic of food waste prevention experienced some type of resistance from the venues with whom they worked (Figure 4). Thirty-eight percent of these planners were told the venue "already does all they can for food waste reduction." One-third of the time planners are told "the staff is not equipped to handle food waste," with 31 percent encountering "attitudinal resistance," and one-quarter being told there would be an additional charge for any type of efforts (e.g., composting, donation) to handle excess food.

While this type of resistance is generally perceived as negative, 60 percent of the time those who encounter resistance to food waste conversations are more likely to use a different venue for future events. The study suggests not only is proactively bringing up solutions to prevent food waste a positive factor for increased planner business, but also that resisting food waste prevention discussions is an active deterrent to planners reusing a venue.

FIGURE 4. INFLUENCE OF RESISTANCE EFFORTS ON VENUE LOYALTY AND TRUST

How did resistance efforts influence your loyalty and trust toward the venue?



When proactive conversations occur, the solutions aren't particularly creative

On those rare occasions when venues proactively address food waste, the suggested approach is likely to be either composting or food donation 68 percent of the time.

A minority of the venues recognized or offered the following solutions:

1 Portion Control and Menu Planning

- adjusting meal sizes and quantities based on accurate head counts to minimize overproduction
- offering customizable menu options or pre-ordering to reduce food waste and ensure meals match attendee preferences
- shortening menus or serving snacks instead of full meals to prevent excess food

2 Sustainable Practices

- implementing environmentally friendly practices, such as composting food waste or using sustainable packaging
- reducing the use of disposable items and opting for reusable or recyclable materials

3 Communication and Collaboration

- enhancing communication between event organizers, catering services, and venues to coordinate food waste reduction efforts
- collaborating with local communities, shelters, or charities to facilitate food donation and redistribution

4 Employee Involvement

- encouraging staff members to take leftovers home or participate in food donation initiatives
- empowering employees to contribute to food waste reduction through education and engagement

5 Efficiency and Planning

- implementing better planning processes, including accurate head counts, portion control, and meal planning strategies
- utilizing technology or innovative solutions to track and manage food waste throughout the event life cycle

6 Behavioral Change

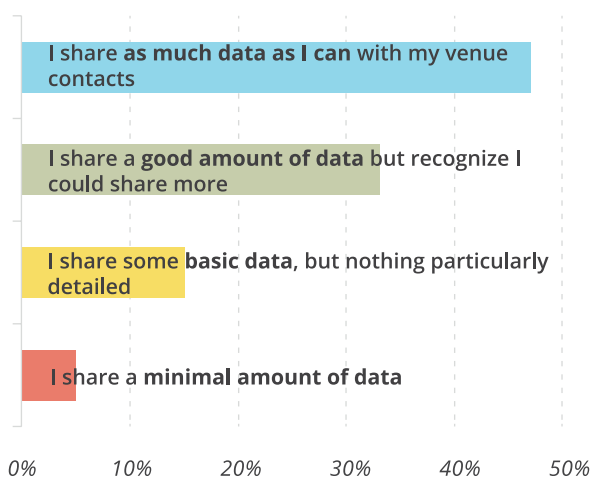
- promoting a culture of responsibility and mindfulness regarding food waste among event organizers, attendees, and stakeholders
- educating employees and attendees about the importance of food waste prevention and providing resources for behavior change

Greater data collection represents an untapped opportunity

Sixty-two percent of planners said they would “actively advocate and promote” greater data collection at all their events (Figure 5). Another 33 percent said they would consider doing this for some of their events if their clients were agreeable. Currently, less than half share as much data as they can, mainly due to lack of top-of-mind awareness on the parts of both planners and attendees. For example, 43 percent said that “sharing this type of data is not top of mind during the planning process” while another 40 percent said that “no one asks for it.” Only 13 percent said they did not have attendee data readily available.

FIGURE 5. SHARING DATA ON PREVIOUS EVENTS WITH VENUE CONTACTS

Which of the following best describes your experience with sharing data about previous events and attendees with your venue contacts?



Some potential solutions are more apt to be adopted than others

While there are several underutilized strategies for preventing food waste, some are seen as more desirable than others (Figure 6). While planners readily embrace the idea of food donation, they are far less likely to reduce the number of meal and snack breaks, which are often a major source of food waste. Many planners also hesitate to limit replenishment of serving vessels, or limit items at preset meals. While planners clearly want to address food waste, there are some areas at which planners will balk, at least for the time being.

Greater understanding, awareness, and training are needed

The meeting planning community is very committed to sustainability and limiting food waste (Figure 7). The study shows creating greater awareness of the problem of food waste and creating a reputation as a good corporate citizen are high priorities for meeting planners. Creating a better understanding of sustainability among meeting planners and providing helpful training on food waste reduction were seen as the two most useful solutions for combating food waste.

FOOD WASTE PREVENTION IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS.

Data suggests any venue revenue depreciation would easily be offset by increased preference share in the future.

FIGURE 6. PLANNER-RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR FOOD WASTE REDUCTION

The following are things a planner might advocate to reduce food waste. Given all the requirements to make your events successful, please indicate the likelihood that you would consider these approaches to avoid food waste.

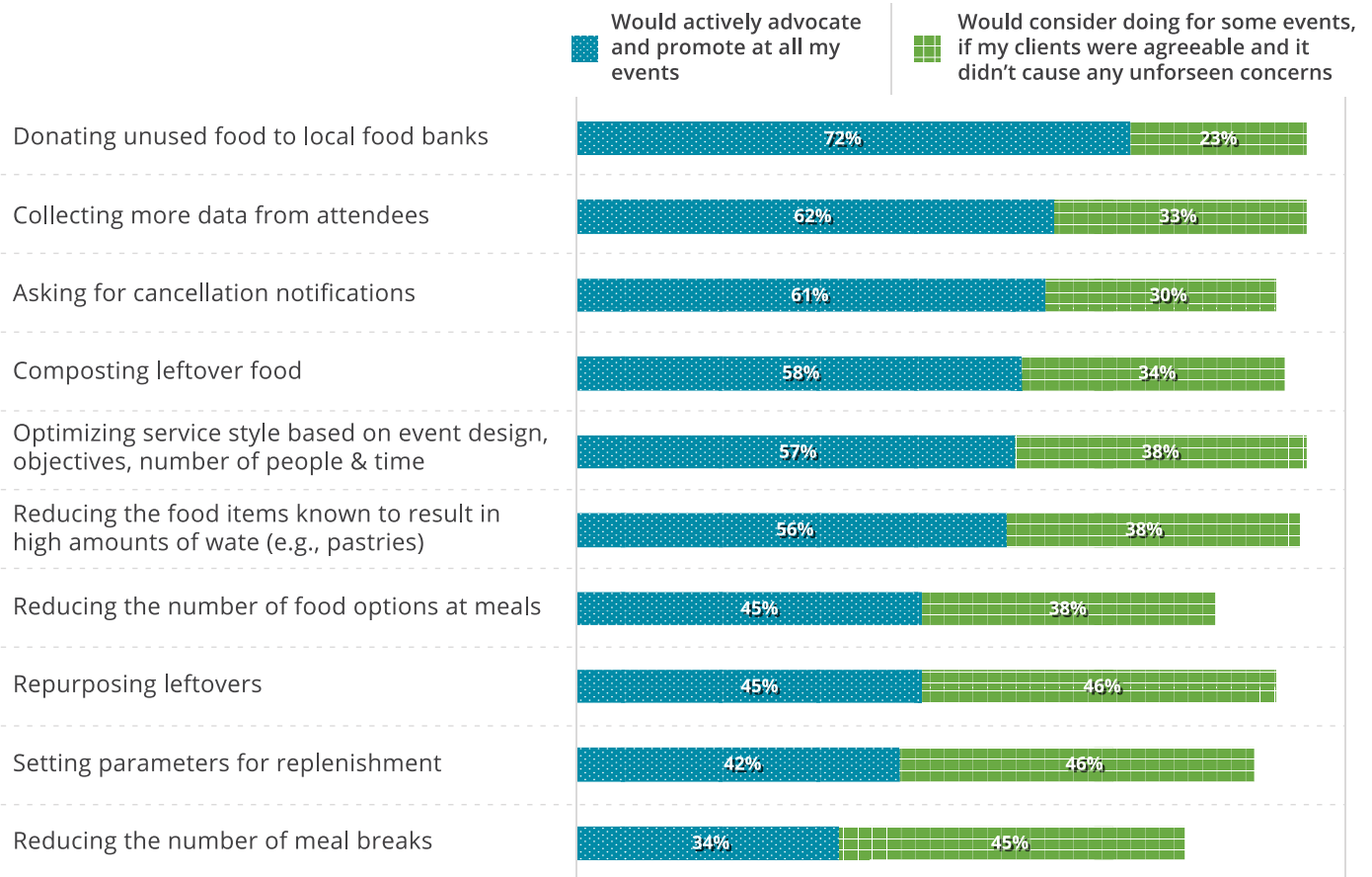
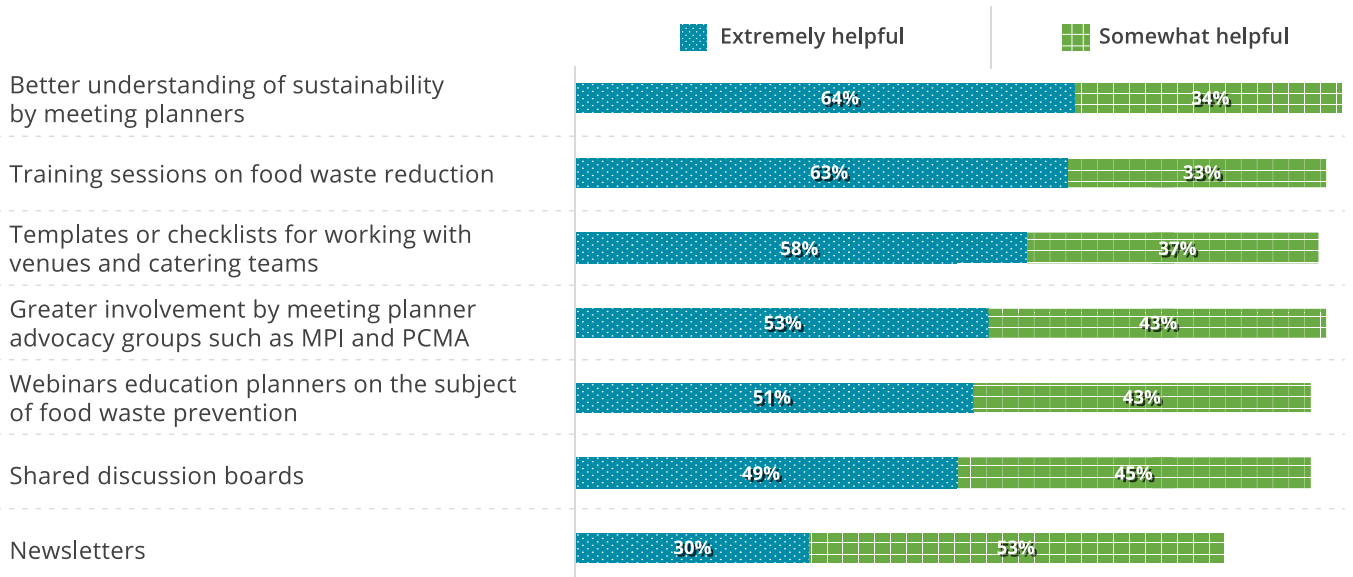


FIGURE 7. ASSESSING PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS IN COMBATING FOOD WASTE

Please rate the following as to how helpful you believe each of the solutions to be in combating food waste.



Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that partnering with planners on preventing food waste at their meetings and events represents a critical best business practice for meeting venues. While some venues may feel constrained by the need to increase revenues by selling as much food as possible, the data suggests any revenue depreciation would easily be offset by increased preference share in the future. Conversely, resisting food waste reduction efforts by adding surcharges, or even just showing “attitudinal resistance” through lack of cooperation, will often result in planners taking their future business elsewhere.

Currently, both event venues and planners often overlook the full spectrum of possibilities, often restricting themselves to practices like composting and food donation. While these measures are crucial, they predominantly target food waste reduction rather than its prevention. Many discarded food items, such as surplus condiments, breads, pastries, and desserts, are unsuitable for donation. This research aims to illuminate strategies that proactively prevent food waste, offering a more comprehensive approach to sustainability in event management.

The planners in this study offered a range of solutions to combating food waste. They can be summarized in the following ways:

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS: Many advocate for raising awareness among planners and attendees, emphasizing the importance of open dialogue, data demonstration, and education for workers and employees. Additional practical solutions range from donating excess food to food banks or shelters, utilizing composting

methods, and minimizing portion sizes to more innovative approaches like repurposing food waste as a resource.

SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES: Planners are increasingly prioritizing sustainability and seeking to innovate new options to uphold it, aiming to enhance the value of their products through sustainable practices. Emphasizing corporate responsibility, they highlight the collective effort needed from planners, caterers, and other stakeholders in reducing food waste. Advocating for improved management and training, they aim to institutionalize the practice of food waste reduction as a standard within the industry.

COLLABORATION AND ADVOCACY: Efforts to reduce food waste involve collaborating with major brand hotels and advocating for waste reduction among not only planners but also caterers and other organizers. Suggestions include leveraging social media networking and creating awareness campaigns. Many stress the significance of community engagement in these endeavors, whether through distributing flyers, raising awareness via campaigns, or involving local agencies.

LEGAL AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS: Addressing the issue of food waste involves navigating legal and policy considerations, which includes understanding state or local laws and regulations. Alongside these practical concerns, there is a pervasive ethical sentiment condemning food waste, as many express the view that it is unacceptable to witness people suffering from hunger while significant amounts of food go to waste.

The imperative to combat food waste in meetings and events extends far beyond mere environmental responsibility; it is a strategic

business decision with substantial benefits for meeting venues. By adopting proactive measures to minimize food waste, venues can not only align with sustainability goals but also enhance their reputation, reduce costs, and attract discerning clients who prioritize ethical and efficient practices. Embracing this ethos is

not just an investment in a greener future but also a savvy move toward long-term success and competitiveness in an increasingly conscientious market landscape. This is an opportunity to redefine the standards of excellence in event management, one sustainable plate at a time.

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The full study is available for review on the World Wildlife Fund website, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/>.



together possible

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