



# A NEW ERA OF F&B:

SUSTAINING TOMORROW'S  
DELEGATES TODAY

By Elaine Pofeldt

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*Developed in partnership with*





## Once relegated to the bottom of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, **meeting professionals no longer think of food and beverage functions as simply fulfilling physiological needs.**

Instead, they seek to design these experiences to cultivate love, belonging, esteem and self-actualization.

Nearly 61 percent of meeting professionals said food and beverage is one of the most important factors in selecting a hotel, after location (80 percent) and room rates (76 percent), according to an early 2023 trends report released by Meeting Professionals International and *Meetings Today* magazine.<sup>1</sup>

And with food and beverage playing such a leading role, meeting professionals pay particular attention to five key touchpoints of an attendee's experience: (1) registration, (2) arrival, (3) meals during the event, (4) breaks and (5) departure.

New practices for dietary accommodations, plant-based entrees, sustainable and eco-friendly meals that lower the event's carbon footprint, purpose/brain foods and even nostalgia are influencing the attendee experience at each of these touch points. Many meeting professionals are

welcoming these trends and others that raise the bar on their own creativity.

However, there are two challenges to achieving these goals: the rising costs that have come with an inflationary environment and staffing shortages that make it harder to execute on creative food and beverage experiences. In a recent survey, nearly 68 percent of meeting professionals said increasing costs for food and beverage, and other event needs were some of their biggest challenges for 2023, followed by facility staffing levels (30 percent).

Despite the challenges, many meeting planners have been able to find creative solutions, collaborating with hotels and other venues to keep pace with the trends in designing the end-to-end journey for attendees.

***Here is a look at how food and beverage trends are reshaping every aspect of meeting and event delivery, according to leading experts and professionals.***

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.mpi.org/docs/default-source/research-and-reports/0123\\_mpi\\_trends\\_for\\_2023\\_ehandbook.pdf?mkt\\_tok=NzkxLVpOTi00NzEAAAGKDuKRlq0qyG\\_MdRI8Eifqsn7FOR1iaVEd2JeL6EGtxXfTxxPfbG3VmVVTAL10H-1uUEAOtxt\\_SLcnDPByPiBdERAOV1JT-xU7BJeZHs9V](https://www.mpi.org/docs/default-source/research-and-reports/0123_mpi_trends_for_2023_ehandbook.pdf?mkt_tok=NzkxLVpOTi00NzEAAAGKDuKRlq0qyG_MdRI8Eifqsn7FOR1iaVEd2JeL6EGtxXfTxxPfbG3VmVVTAL10H-1uUEAOtxt_SLcnDPByPiBdERAOV1JT-xU7BJeZHs9V)

# TOUCHPOINT #1: REGISTRATION



**Registration can be an important time to set the tone for an event and let attendees know they are welcome and will experience a sense of belonging, regardless of food preferences or allergies.**

Special diets—vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, dairy-free or “flexitarian”—are now common, and meeting planners are giving more attention than ever before to accommodating these preferences, as well as religious diets such as Kosher and Halal, as they make menu decisions.

“People are more health-conscious and health-minded,” says Loren Maisels, CMP, meeting professional and founder and president of LoMA Marketing Agency in Toronto. “More people are leaning toward a less-meat, more vegetarian/vegan-style diet. Five years ago, that might have been 10 percent to 15 percent of the audience. Now it is closer to 30 percent.”

With more guests on special diets, meeting planners and organizers are paying scrupulous attention to the registration process to make sure they have planned ahead for options that satisfy a multitude of diets.

“The kinds of events I do these days are much more about accommodating those who are coming,” says Sandy Lyons, a meeting planner in California, USA. “It’s less about what they’re greeted with at the very beginning and more about how we can do it in a way that really makes it easy for someone, regardless of their needs, to have a really good experience.”

Against this backdrop, many meeting professionals continue to increase their attention to the earliest stages of interacting with attendees around dietary preferences and

needs. “You have to be proactive,” Maisels says. “A lot of kitchens and properties can’t necessarily add something like a large amount of tofu or Beyond Meat at the last minute. They don’t necessarily carry all those things in large quantities. It’s not something you can buy 48 hours before.”

Organizers are referring to the IACC’s Guide To Managing Conference Delegate Dietary Requirements<sup>2</sup>, developed with industrywide collaboration from groups such as the World Obesity Federation and Events Industry Council and tailored to individual regional markets.

“It is not wise to see dietary choices as a personal option, as often they are medically, religiously or culturally necessary and should be taken seriously,” according to the IACC guide. “Dietary restrictions should not be taken lightly; everyone should know that they can pose a health risk if someone is served the wrong ingredient.”

To ensure that the most common special diets (vegetarian, vegan, pescatarian, ketogenic, flexitarian, Whole 30), health-related diets (gluten-free, celiac disease, diabetes) and allergies (peanuts, tree nuts, shellfish, fish, eggs, milk, soy and wheat) are considered, IACC suggests using check boxes. “Avoid at all costs, adding an open text box, which simply asks delegates to enter in free text ‘Any Dietary Requirements,’” the guide cautions. “This will result in a single category of everything from the need-to-have, to the like-to-have.”

To make sure attendees are cared for, the group encourages meeting planners to request that a confirmation be signed and returned by the venue, and that the venue include the requests in the BOE/event order.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iacconline.org/guide-meeting-delegates-dietary-requirements>

## REGISTRATION: (CONTINUED)

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While in the past it may have been acceptable to offer a vegetarian option to accommodate people who are not meat eaters, many planners have reconsidered that approach to accommodate dairy-free preferences. “Now I would switch that to, ‘Can you include vegan options?’” says publicist Olga Luz Tirado of New York, U.S.A., whose projects have included planning galas.

Some meeting planners find that if they think creatively, they can find options that satisfy several dietary preferences simultaneously, helping to keep costs in line. For instance, opting for menu items that are naturally gluten-free may eliminate the need to add an option that is specifically for people who don’t eat gluten. Someone who eats Kosher or Halal may find the vegan or vegetarian options suitable.

Given the plethora of requests, Karen Shackman, president of the destination management firm Shackman Group New York (U.S.A.), has sometimes opted for buffet-style dining that includes menu options for those on special diets, to avoid “short-order cooking” that overwhelms the

kitchen. “Every client is trying to accommodate the attendees as much as they can,” she says.

Lyons enables guests to make their own choices as they go along. “I do a lot of ‘requires assembly’ kind of food,” she says. “It’s salad bars, taco bars, assembled lettuce wraps. You can easily make it a lettuce wrap versus a sandwich, or a salad versus an assembled dish. We do a lot of different things creatively. It is all about identifying exactly what is in each item, so someone doesn’t have to be embarrassed by whatever their restrictions are.”

In these cases, Lyons says, “proteins are always on the side, with plenty of vegan and vegetarian options.”

In a similar vein, for breakfasts, she might opt for a yogurt parfait bar that stays out for a while. “I’ll do a couple of different types of yogurt—dairy and non-dairy, with fruit and nuts—assembly required,” she says. “People grab their meal and go make phone calls. It’s not as social as it used to be. It’s much more functional.”

**People are more health-conscious  
and health-minded.**

## TOUCHPOINT #2: CHECK-IN



The point at which travelers arrive at a destination is the ideal one to make them feel welcome, break the ice and make them feel appreciated—and many venues are looking to get more creative with food and beverage than giving them a bottle of water. The idea is to give guests something to connect around so they can make the most of networking.

Options include personalized welcome gifts including the following.

- In-room snack baskets that include treats and beverages from local makers and establishments
- Complimentary movie rentals with popcorn
- Gifts with a theme that celebrate the surrounding area, such as a local food festival or outdoor attraction, such as packets of trail mix or picnic supplies<sup>3</sup>
- Nostalgic food gifts, such as fresh baked treats
- Grab-and-go snack stations in the lobby with special extras available for purchase<sup>4</sup>

For some planners and organizers, check-in is the critical point to set the tone for the entire meeting. “We are doing

a number of special things for our attendees,” says Jessica Matthews, DBH, an associate professor of integrative wellness at Point Loma Nazarene University, who is co-founder of Health and Well-Being Coaching Conference in San Diego, California, USA.

She promises to “practice what we preach” in the promotional materials, through “early morning group movement experiences, guided mindfulness activities spread throughout the event, social gatherings while enjoying plant-forward appetizers and meals (and a great assortment of delicious beverages) and other special elements, including an awards ceremony to celebrate and honor incredible coaches and leaders making an impact in the field.”

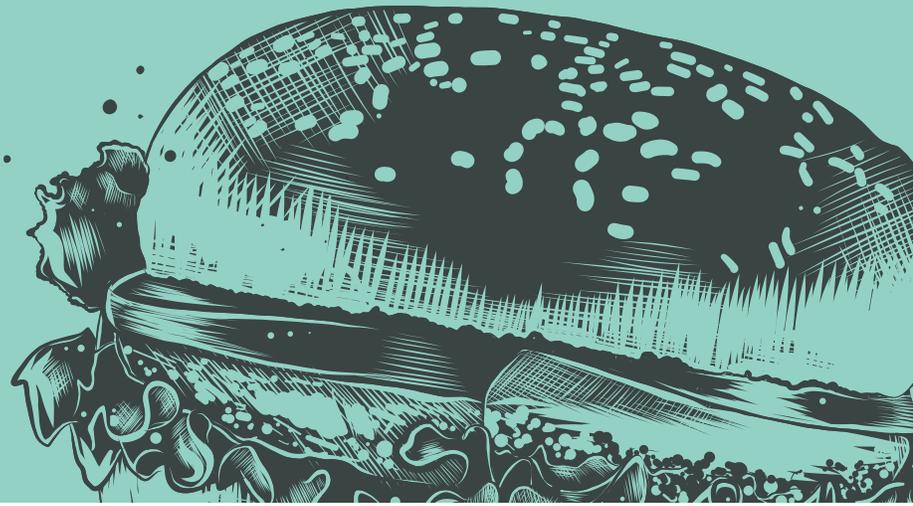
To stay consistent with the event’s promise, she is providing the attendees—professional health and wellness coaches—with an arrival gift of sustainable, reusable insulated lunch bags packed with healthy snacks, rather than the standard tote bags most conferences provide.

**“The idea is to give guests something to connect around so they can make the most of networking.”**

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cvent.com/en/blog/hospitality/hotel-welcome-basket-ideas>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cvent.com/en/blog/hospitality/hotel-amenity-ideas>

# TOUCHPOINT #3: MEALS



If there's one trend that dominates the rest when it comes to mealtime, it's sustainability, and meeting planners are being creative in catering to organizers and attendees' desire for menus to be sustainable and supportive of a healthy climate and environment. This means recognizing that the way food is cultivated, transported and distributed, served, consumed and disposed of all have an environmental impact. It is all about good food attendees can trust.

According to a World Travel & Tourism Council international benchmarking exercise conducted across 27,000 accommodation providers, a third of venues now provide vegetarian options for every course in their food and beverage provision. For example, Radisson Hotel Group has set ambitious goals of offering up to 70% vegetarian and 40% plant-based options at their hotels in Central Europe.

## Eating local

The question for sustainability often intersects with a desire to prioritize healthy local fare that doesn't require long-distance transportation and offers a taste of the area's culture. For instance, in Copenhagen, there is currently an emphasis on low-cost ingredients from Nordic countries, such as carrots and root-based local products. "You are trying to create some interest with that," Ankaer says.

The trend is also popular in the U.S. and Canada. "I'm seeing a lot of our clients wanting to support local food entrepreneurs and small businesses," says Gina Mariko Rosales, an event planner at Make It Mariko in San Francisco.

Many meeting professionals find that doing so allows attendees a more interesting and authentic experience. It also helps to support small, community-based vendors and suppliers, including those from underrepresented groups. "I had one client 'If I'm going to get a beef empanada, I want to order from an Latinx vendor. They want authentic food cooked by people trained in that cuisine and supporting small business. They don't want to have any caterer doing Asian cuisine—they want an Asian chef doing Asian cuisine.'"

Some chefs provide micro-history lessons. When Executive Sous Chef Laura Clawson at Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Ariz., offers a menu item such as Three Sisters Salad, which has roots in indigenous communities, she shares it. "You really get a good sense of history, and it makes you bond with your food. You start a relationship where you're understanding your food in a way that you didn't really understand it before," Clawson says. "We find a story and turn it into a learning experience."

Meeting professionals are also looking to bring in notes to the cuisine that attendees won't experience elsewhere. "Having global flavors and leveraging global flavors using local vendors will continue to be important, to give people that variety of experience," Maisels says.

## Transparent menus

Many guests are seeking greater transparency in menu choices than in the past and want to know what ingredients are included and where the food originated. Sometimes, that

## MEALS: (CONTINUED)

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means providing ingredients lists at the buffets. “I give away my recipes at every event,” Lyons says.

“It’s less about the story and more about the source, more about exactly what’s in it,” Lyons says. “I almost feel like I need a liability waiver these days. We don’t start with any sauces. Mine are all from scratch. I go to really good sources. Even then, I can’t absolutely guarantee there were not pesticides in the ground before the organic produce was grown there. It’s labeled organic.”

Some meeting professionals mention local vendors on the menus or on their websites. “Because they are wanting to support local businesses, there are always shout outs in terms of who the vendor is,” Mariko Rosales says.

Much of a hotel’s environmental impact is generated through sourced products, services and activities. As an example, Radisson Hotel Group partners with like-minded suppliers committed to doing business responsibly, providing integrated projects and solutions for our hotels. Suppliers are required to respect a code of conduct and request the same from their supply chain, including third-party labor agencies.

Other times, there’s a more personalized approach, where the chef becomes part of the dining experience. “If it’s a small, intimate event that’s 20 people ... maybe they’ll come out and talk about the menu,” she says.

To personalize smaller events, Alicia Schiro, the CEO of Aced It Events in New York City, creates special menus. “If we’re doing an intimate dinner, we’ll create a specialty menu for the client with their logo,” she says. “The chef will come out, talk about the entire menu and pair each course with a wine. Most chefs are sommeliers. Or we’ll bring in a sommelier to talk about the wine. It’s all about the experience. It just changes things up a little bit.”

## Small plates

Small-plate appetizers, featuring nostalgic foods like sliders, are also popular. “There are beef sliders, chicken sliders,” says Schiro. She says it is possible to customize sliders to be vegan or vegetarian.

Jason Allan Scott, a keynote speaker and MPI member, recently attended an event for an affiliate in the U.S. South. “It was small plates, all-around constant eating,” he says. “But it was vegan, dairy-free, wheat-free. That surprised me.”

## Avoiding waste

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that 1.3 billion tons of food is thrown away every year, representing almost 40 percent of the total food produced globally—and a misuse of natural resources. This waste contributes significantly to the world’s carbon footprint because of the energy needed to grow and transport food.

Many meeting planners are working with hotels to make sure that the way food is served reduces waste, in keeping with clients’ corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs)—or more informal goals. “Buffets have attendants to mitigate waste, and the plastic serving aspect,” Maisels says. “A lot are shifting to biodegradable, no straws. We have seen less plastics.”

One growing emphasis is on reducing the amount of food that gets tossed, a trend that began five to 10 years ago but has gathered new urgency as the climate crisis has called attention to the carbon emissions related to food production. “Venues and hotels have come up with plans to make sure

## MEALS: (CONTINUED)

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there is not too much food waste,” Ankaer says. “They try to limit how much food they put out on buffets, so you don’t take out a lot of food that is not being eaten. You limit yourself in how much you put on the buffet, to limit the food waste. If buffet is emptying out, you refill it from the kitchen.”

They are also using smaller plates, to help attendees make better decisions on how much food they will actually eat, versus what they leave on their dish.

Many hotels in his region donate leftover food to area nonprofits or homes for the elderly. “They will take the food over and deliver to them so it can still be used. They do that within four hours, so they can have fresh food there. If it’s packed in plastic, it will stay a bit longer. Normally, you can have it up to 24 hours.”

To that end, Radisson Hotel Group has partnered with Too Good To Go to reduce food waste. Too Good To Go is a solution that allows businesses to sell surplus meals at the end of the shift or day to combat food waste. Users and businesses save food and help preserve the environment—reducing food, energy and water wastage, as well as CO2 emissions. The Too Good To Go app enables hotels to sell the food for a set, reduced price, helping to reduce waste and protect the planet.

## Maximizing tight budgets

Avoiding waste must be balanced with making sure there is enough food at the event, especially if there is a big uptick in registrations at the last minute.

“Some of our clients are significantly under-guaranteeing their food and beverage,” Shackman says. “They’re unclear how many people are going to show up. On a couple of occasions, more people showed up than they expected, and it’s been a bit of a scramble. In one case, it was a very large group. It put a lot of strain on the kitchen.”

Some hotels are finding ways to allow organizers to offer exciting menus at a lower cost by offering day-of-the-week options. “Monday is one buffet option; Tuesday is another,” Maisels says. “If you pick the menu of that day, you achieve savings. I’m seeing that a lot more.”

**“You start a relationship where you’re understanding your food in a way that you didn’t really understand it before.”**

# TOUCHPOINT #4: BREAKS



**Breaks are one of the most important opportunities for networking at any event, and meeting professionals are looking to make the most of them to ensure attendees have a great experience.**

The days when organizers could simply offer plentiful food in big portions at mealtimes—and rely on sugary pastries to keep everyone awake during breaktimes—have ended, for the most part. “Soft drinks and granola bars are not cutting it anymore,” says Alicia Schiro of Aced It Events.

Many organizers are looking to make breaks more exciting and Instagrammable. At some recent events, for instance, Schiro’s clients have opted to make coffee part of the entertainment. “They’re doing specialty coffee with an onsite barista,” she says. “It’s all about the experience.”

Creative coffee break stations that incorporate activity are also catching on. “You don’t have to stand around the buffet all the time,” Ankaer says. “You can take something and go for a nice stroll. Some people feel it’s more engaging to go for a walk with a couple of colleagues, or other participants. Some of the venues are also situated in a nice location, where you have green areas outside.”

Some planners are keeping things interesting through the pacing of how they serve food at breaks. “It isn’t an open bar of cookies and pastries all day,” Lyons says. “It is small bites on a plate all day long that are coming in.”

The “brain food” trend is catching on, with more planners looking to keep attendees energized with foods rich in phytonutrients and Omega-3 fatty acids, lower in sugar or more eco-friendly, such as sustainable coffee. Ankaer says he is seeing locally grown fresh strawberries or cherries, and energy bars, served in addition to the pastries—“something that is easy to take away.”

That’s not to say that sweet treats are gone from menus entirely. Some organizers are opting for a hybrid approach, alternating a “healthy” coffee break with one featuring traditional pastries and sweets, Maisels says. “They’re focused on balance,” she says.

For later in the day, one option that’s growing in popularity is the milkshake bar, sometimes including a boozy milkshake. “Guests get to choose their toppings—strawberry, coconut, etc.—and what kind of alcohol,” Schiro says.

Nonalcoholic beverage options like mocktails are also more present, as non-drinkers make their preferences known. “We can’t just assume everyone wants a glass of wine or beer,” Maisels says. “There is a large group of people who are choosing not to drink but still want to participate socially.”

However, some beverage options have become prohibitive for some meeting organizers in today’s inflationary environment, requiring an imaginative approach to breaks. “Inflation is real,” Maisels says. “Prices have increased exponentially. We’re finding you have to be very creative and cost-effective. Things like a kombucha bar or a coffee bar, those kinds of things are very dependent at the end of the day on budget. It’s a very pricey time right now.”

It is also important to stay attuned to local sensitivities around social distancing. With anxieties from covid still lingering in some parts of the world, Shackman has noticed that stations at break times remain more separated than they used to be, and many of the snacks being served are still wrapped or have lids. And there are other sanitary measures. “The staff, at least in New York City, are still wearing masks,” Shackman says.

At one recent event in Copenhagen, the organizers served energy-bars made with protein from grasshoppers on breaks, according to Per Ankaer, managing director at the events agency MCI Copenhagen.

At another gathering in the city, the chef went even further. “They were serving live ants as one of their meals,” Ankaer says. “Everyone is trying to experiment.”

Although these trendy approaches are beyond what more conservative markets might implement, there’s no doubt that innovation is reinvigorating the food and beverage choices at conferences and events around the globe this year.



## TOUCHPOINT #5: DEPARTURE

**Making an event memorable as guests are starting to think about departure requires meeting professionals to become even more creative about food and beverage.**

Melinda L. Burdette, CMP, CMM, senior director of events at Meeting Professionals International, says the approach to departure depends on the type of event. “If it is a lunch, dinner or other food function, then having desserts ‘to-go’ as a takeaway treat can be nice and fun with activations on their way out,” Burdette says. “I am still seeing room-drop amenities as the basic ‘treat’ for guests at events.”

At some events, Schiro brings in a master mixologist to teach guests how to make the perfect Manhattan. As a parting gift, Schiro recently had cocktail kits made, with “everything you need to make a cocktail” inside of a velvet travel bag where someone can roll up all all eight tools, including a spoon and shaker. “This is a travel cocktail kit. You can bring it anywhere,” she says. “It rolls up really cute, and it’s easy for them to travel back home with it,” she says. Even better, “they were branded with the client’s logo,” she says.

Departure can be a great time to reinforce the messaging of the event through food and beverage. At The Health and Wellbeing Coaching Conference, Matthews—looking to stay consistent with the event’s wellness-oriented theme—is closing the event with “a full (and amazing!) make-your-own acai bowl bar, which is very fitting both for the nature of our event and our location of San Diego.”

Sometimes, the most welcome touch at the end of any food- and beverage-driven event is leftovers. In keeping with the sustainability trend, Lyons makes it possible for attendees to bring home food that hasn’t been eaten in provided containers. “All our leftovers are going to individuals, with the thought process that people take it home to their families,” she says.

It’s not only about sustainability but also about being part of the human family—the reason for connecting at meetings in the first place.

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## CONCLUSION

The barriers between meeting professionals and catering companies and executive chefs have collapsed.

Today’s food and beverage environment is a collaborative one in which accommodations are seen as opportunities for creativity and innovation and functions aren’t just designed to meet physiological needs.

Meeting professionals consider every facet of event design and execution strategically, ushering in a new era of consideration for nourishment and an exciting space for innovation in food and beverage.

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## About Meeting Professionals International

Meeting Professionals International (MPI) is the largest meeting and event industry association worldwide. The organization provides innovative and relevant education, networking opportunities and business exchanges, and acts as a prominent voice for the promotion and growth of the industry. MPI has a global community of 60,000 meeting and event professionals including nearly 14,000 engaged members. It has nearly 70 chapters, clubs and members in more than 75 countries worldwide. "When we meet, we change the world." For more information, visit <https://MPI.org>.

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## About Radisson Hotel Group

The Radisson family of brands can be found around the world in more than 120 countries, with currently over 1,700 hotels in operation and under development. Radisson Hotel Group operates the business in EMEA and APAC with over 1,100 hotels in operation and under development. The international hotel group is rapidly growing with a plan to double the portfolio by 2025. The Group's overarching brand promise is Every Moment Matters with a signature "Yes I Can!" service ethos. The Radisson family of brands portfolio includes Radisson Collection, Radisson Blu, Radisson, Radisson RED, Radisson Individuals, Park Plaza, Park Inn by Radisson, Country Inn & Suites by Radisson, and prizeotel brought together under one commercial umbrella brand Radisson Hotels.

**Radisson Rewards** is Radisson Hotel Group's loyalty program, which delivers an elevated experience that makes Every Moment Matter. As the most streamlined program in the sector, members enjoy exceptional advantages and can access their benefits from day one across a wide range of hotels in Europe, Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific.

**Radisson Meetings** provides tailored solutions for any event or meeting, including hybrid solutions placing guests and their needs at the heart of its offer. Radisson Meetings is built around three strong service commitments: personal, professional and memorable, while delivering on brilliant basics and being uniquely 100% carbon neutral.

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## About Elaine Pofeldt

Elaine Pofeldt is an independent journalist and speaker who specializes in entrepreneurship and careers. She is author of the books *Tiny Business*, *Big Money* and *The Million-Dollar, One-Person Business*. As a senior editor at *Fortune Small Business* magazine, she was twice nominated for the National Magazine Award for her feature stories. Her work has appeared in *FORTUNE*, *Money*, *CNBC Inc.*, *Forbes*, *Crain's New York Business* and many other business publications and she is a contributor to the Economist Intelligence Unit. Elaine also helps clients with projects such as blogging, ghost writing, white papers, reports, ebooks, custom content, academic editing and proposal writing and editing.

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