

# ENOUGH TO GO AROUND

*Donating food from meetings and events is getting a lot easier thanks to mobile apps, but education still lags behind.* BY JASON HENSEL

# THE FOOD WEIGHED MORE THAN AN AVERAGE VOLUNTEER. THAT'S HOW MUCH THERE WAS AVAILABLE FOR DONATION.

It was the New York University's (NYU) Entrepreneurs Festival, a two-day event hosted at the university, and Transfession organized a group of volunteers to bring extra food from the event to the Bowery Mission.

"When they arrived on site, there was so much food the volunteers had to take an Uber XL to get to the location that was just 10 minutes away," says Samir Goel, Transfession co-founder. "Many of our pickups since then have been equally as large or larger, but this one stood out because one of our volunteers messaged me and said, 'There was so much food. It weighed more than I do.' We were able to rescue 165 pounds of food from the event that day."

Transfession is one of a growing number of organizations dedicated to eradicating hunger in the U.S. Since beginning in October 2014, it's rescued more than 11,000 pounds of food from more than 200 events across New York City, and the organization recently released an app that operates like "Uber for food rescue," which enables real-time food recovery for meeting and event planners who use it.

"Many of the event planners and caterers have always wanted to find ways to give the extra food since they see the waste every day," Goel says. "In the past, they were likely to be dismissed but today there is increased focus on CSR, and especially food waste, and thus organizations are actively looking for ways to give their extra food."

Nancy Zavada, CMP (MPI Oregon Chapter), president of Meet-Green, says that it's definitely becoming much easier for event planners to connect with food banks, shelters, etc. through the use of technology.

"We use Second Harvest's website to help us find food banks in meeting destinations, Whole Earth Calculator (a very valuable app for calculating and donating), Transfession and Food Runners in San Francisco get the food to the right people quickly," Zavada says. "This will only increase in the future and make it easier to donate."

Rock and Wrap It Up!, in conjunction with EventMobi, created the Whole Earth Calculator app.

"At its essence, the user enters the pounds of food that they are recovering at an event. The app, using formulas from the EPA and USDA, turns the weight of the food into estimated meals that will be served and the carbon footprint that will be avoided by not having the food go into landfill," says Jim Spellos, CMP (MPI Greater New York Chapter), owner of Meeting U. and vice president of digital media at Rock and Wrap It Up! "Additionally, we provide the planner the easy ability to socially share this great work with their constituency within the app."

Another new mobile app on the evolving food donation market is Boston-based Spoiler Alert, which was developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and launched in November 2015. "Similar to other industries, we've seen a lot of movement toward using mobile and Web-based applications as tools for collaboration and building sharing economies. Many of these developments have come in the form of mobile apps to connect businesses, nonprofits,

volunteers, drivers and peers," says Ricky Ashenfelter, co-founder and CEO of Spoiler Alert, when talking about food donation technology. "Our team is excited to be working more toward enterprise software that is geared for businesses. In the future, we expect to see more software-hardware integrations, including with sensors, food storage and handling infrastructure and vehicles."

## MISPERCEPTIONS AND LOGISTICS

While it's getting easier to donate extra food, there is still a perception that the practice is illegal. Donors, though, are protected by the U.S. Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act.

"Some still don't know about the law. Some know about it but don't trust it. Liability risk casts a long shadow and the job of the corporate lawyers who say 'Don't do it' is to minimize their client's risk," says Tyra Hilliard, PhD, CMP (MPI North Florida Chapter), an attorney and meeting industry speaker. "It's up to the client (hotel, restaurant, group or other) to say, 'We know there's a risk. We think it's small. We're willing to take it to do the right thing.' We take business risks all the time. But conventional business says to only take risks when there are potential (usually financial) rewards at stake. We have to change our concept of the risk/reward model."

Food donation is not a liability problem, though, Goel says. It's an education problem.

"Most corporations are unaware of the legal protections and literature around food waste but have an inbuilt fear of lawsuits, which is in part due to our lawsuit-heavy culture," Goel says. "The current standard of liability is food that is knowingly unfit for human consumption."

He offers a great way to describe the difference.

"It is the difference between donating a can of milk you left out for a day or two, which a reasonable person would not consume, and donating extra food from an event, which you would bring home for your family," Goel says.

Any successful food recovery program, Ashenfelter says, is dependent on education, planning and collaboration.

"Step one is [planners] familiarizing themselves with appropriate food handling and safety best practices (as outlined by ServSafe and other governing bodies)," Ashenfelter says. "Step two is working with staff to build in standard operating procedures for handling donatable food and securing the appropriate storage containers and equipment to ultimately distribute it. Step three is identifying a recipient organization capable of distributing this food to people in need."

In addition, one of the biggest hurdles to overcome is time (and what planner doesn't struggle with that?).

"What I always say to caterers and venues is that at first it will indeed be a bit more time-consuming as you establish a relationship and a rhythm with your local food rescue operation," says Dana Siles, community service chair for the National Association for Catering and Events' (NACE) New England chapter. "But over time, just as any



# Food Donation Resources

## Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act

[www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/1791](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/1791)

## Copia

[www.gocopia.com](http://www.gocopia.com)

## Feeding America

[www.feedingamerica.org](http://www.feedingamerica.org)

## Food Runners

[www.foodrunners.org](http://www.foodrunners.org)

## MeetGreen

[www.meetgreen.com](http://www.meetgreen.com)

## Rock and Wrap It Up!

[www.rockandwrapitup.org](http://www.rockandwrapitup.org)

## Spoiler Alert

[www.foodspoileralert.com](http://www.foodspoileralert.com)

## Transfertation

[www.transfertation.org](http://www.transfertation.org)

## Whole Earth Calculator

[www.eventmobi.com/rwu](http://www.eventmobi.com/rwu)

## Zero Percent

[www.zeropercent.us](http://www.zeropercent.us)

chapter, co-founded the Feeding our Neighbors (FON) initiative to help educate colleagues about the Emerson Act and to facilitate better food donation practices in the event industry.

However, even for planners and venues that want to donate food, the logistics can be daunting.

"First, plans have to be made well in advance. As the dinner is progressing is not the best time to make food donation plans," Hilliard says. "Also, planners often expect their hotel/restaurant/caterer to facilitate the donation and some just don't have (or won't take) the time. Coordinating with the food donation partner generally falls to the planner. If the hotel/restaurant agrees to participate, they will need to properly maintain and package food until the food is properly transported."

For Goel's organization, a larger logistical challenge is working with volunteers.

"They are frequently inconsistent or unreliable, which is the fastest way to ruin a client relationship, especially for larger scale, prestigious organizations," he says.

Then there's another challenge that is often overlooked, one that involves the venue directly.

"Many venues/hotels use the leftover food to feed their workers in the company cafeteria and are usually hesitant to have it leave the property," Zavada says. "While the food isn't going to waste, it is also not going to the homeless. They usually cite liability or health risks,

other positive habit you implement into your personal life or work environment, it will become a 'well-oiled machine' and will not be, or feel, time consuming. So I believe 'getting started' is the ultimate hurdle."

She says building relationships with one or two food rescue operations is important, rather than calling one when needed.

"This way an individual or business will be on a first-name basis with their food rescue operation, and if one is unable to provide a food pickup, the donor can rely on the second one," Siles says. "When Gillette Stadium first joined Feeding our Neighbors, we teamed them up with two food rescue operations, both within a 15- to 20-mile radius of the stadium, and both operations benefited from this arrangement."

NACE is an organization dedicated to education and networking within the special events industry. In 2011, Siles and Naomi Raiselle, vice president of communications and PR for the NACE New England

but by pushing back you can make sure the event's food goes to an organization of your choosing (make sure to get it in writing)."

Discussion about food recovery, Spellos says, has to become part of the contract process.

"Unless planners and suppliers commit to this and place it as a contractual commitment, it seems to be the first thing to fall in between the cracks," he says. "There are many organizations who would love to help facilitate the food recovery, but no outside agency can do anything without knowledge about the food that is going to be available for pickup and delivery. Rock and Wrap It Up! is working on a document that should ultimately become a turnkey approach to planners, so that they don't have to go searching for an organization who needs the food or figure out how it will get there."

## FOOD DONATION'S FUTURE

Education, awareness and technology are helping people understand the need for excess food donation in order to address the U.S. hunger problem.

"Knowledge leads to action and, therefore, food donation among our participants has consistently and dramatically increased over the last five years since New England NACE launched FON," Siles says. "Five years ago, we were grateful if five food donations took place over the course of a calendar year. In 2014, over 1,000 tons of surplus event food was donated to local food rescue organizations, with a 50 percent increase in 2015 for a total of more than 1,500 tons of surplus donated food."

Siles and Raiselle's initiative has gained the participation and support of organizations such as the New England International Special Events Society and the Boston Wedding Group and local businesses that have chosen to share their experience and knowledge.

"Two respected and well-known chefs in the Boston area have each gone above and beyond the call of duty: Fairmont Copley Plaza's Chef Laurent Poulain participated in a recent radio feature and invited WGBH's Tina Martin to interview him as he and his staff wrapped up surplus food to donate to Boston Rescue Mission," Siles says. "And Longwood Events & Destinations' Chef David Blessing shared his knowledge and experience at the annual High End Bride event held at The State Room in Boston. Both are a result of the evolution of FON and will help it grow."

Goel believes that food waste donation will evolve to become a norm in the meeting and event industry.

"With the national and international focus on reducing food waste and the growing consumer and business education on its impact, it is only a matter of time until people become more conscious of the issue," he says. "The ideal result will be that corporations and individuals become far more savvy in their consumption and purchasing habits so that they do not have the same level of food waste."

While food donation is essential, Zavada says, a meeting and event planner's first course of action should be to minimize food waste.

"Careful ordering using the event's history, participant sign-ups and steering away from elaborate buffets that look as full as when the first person filled their plate as the last person, save money and the environment," she says. "It is time to rethink the 'abundance' found in the hospitality industry when we travel and attend meetings. Organizations will need to mitigate their risk of looking careless with water and food resources (not to mention, money)." ■