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BREAKFAST, THEY SAY, IS THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY. INCREASINGLY,
IT'S ALSO ONE OF THE BEST TIMES FOR BUSINESS MEETINGS.

BYLINE: Harry Wessel, Sentinel Staff Writer

BODY:

When Laurie Anderson asks a colleague or client for a convenient time to meet, she usually can anticipate the response:

"Do you do breakfast?"

Anderson, who designs and sells employee-benefit plans for J. Rolfe Davis Insurance, is doing breakfast more and more these days.

"It's increasingly difficult to get people away from their work environment," Anderson says. Lunch meetings still take place, she acknowledges, but "lunch, and the lunch hour, is a luxury. Many people are either skipping lunch or cutting lunch short."

Cheryl Taubensee, senior manager with Professional Engineering Consultants and a former executive for a number of prominent business associations, agrees. "When I first came to town 20 years ago, everybody was doing lunch meetings," Taubensee says. But now, "in order for me to meet with clients or my counterparts, the only real chance is a breakfast meeting."

Breakfast meetings, Taubensee says flatly, "are the wave of the future."

Although business-related breakfast meetings are not new, there's plenty of evidence that they are increasing in popularity.

For example, a Santa Rosa, Calif., human-resources association surveyed its 350 members about preferred meeting times, according to Interactive Meeting Solutions President Chuck McPherson,

"About 80 percent said they want before-work meetings rather than lunch meetings," reports McPherson, who serves on the association's board. "People are more alert, more available and probably more apt to get more work done in the morning as opposed to lunch or late-afternoon meetings."

The Citrus Club is observing this trend first-hand. The 3,000-member club, with dining facilities on the 18th floor of Orlando's Republic Bank building, has hosted breakfast, lunch and dinner

meetings since it opened in 1971. More members are scheduling business meetings in the morning, reports Melba Will, the club's catering director who has worked at the club for 31 years.

The club's dining facilities open every weekday at 7:30 a.m., and they're busy for the first hour of operation. Although the large breakfast dining area can seat up to 150 people, "there are times members can't get a table," Will reports. "That would have been very rare five years ago."

Breakfast meetings have become so popular at the nearby Everyday Gourmet on Pine Street that it changed its name this month to the Breakfast Club of Orlando -- despite the fact the restaurant is actually more crowded at lunch.

"There definitely are more [business] meetings at breakfast," says assistant manager Daniel Vazquez. "At lunch, it's like a zoo, and it's loud." The restaurant is quieter during breakfast time, with a lower number of diners but a far higher percentage of business men and women holding meetings, Vazquez says.

DEVOTED TO NETWORKING

Breakfast meetings at restaurants such as the Breakfast Club -- and other popular eateries such as First Watch in Maitland, Brian's in Orlando and Starbucks, Panera and Einstein outlets -- are likely to be small and informal. They're also likely to be meetings devoted to networking, exchanging business leads, or handling outside-but-related matters such as professional associations and nonprofit boards.

One such breakfast meeting occurred last week at the Breakfast Club. Three board members with The Gathering/USA, led by president Larry Kreider, met to discuss personnel matters of the nondenominational Christian outreach group.

"It's easier to leave the house at 7 [a.m.] to get to a meeting than try to battle traffic in the middle of the day," says Kreider, who sits on several nonprofit boards and estimates he attends an average of two breakfast meetings a week.

Gathering board member Dan Needham, a portfolio manager with New England Financial Group, says breakfast meetings are particularly useful for volunteer board meetings. Once he arrives at his office, job responsibilities take priority, making a lunch meeting an iffy proposition. Besides, he says, early in the morning, "your mind is clear, and you don't have the pressures of the day."

Another benefit with breakfast meetings is that they usually are cheaper than lunch meetings, and a lot cheaper than dinner meetings. The third member of the Gathering personnel committee, Orlando veterinarian Fred Hall, picked up the check at the Breakfast Club, with the total for three orders of eggs and coffee coming in under \$15.

The bill was even cheaper at Panera Bread at Lake Eola last week, where Pam Carman met before work with Lyndel Mason. Carman, director of marketing and business development with Trane Orlando, and Mason, an attorney with the Zimmerman, Kiser & Sutcliffe law firm, have held breakfast networking meetings every other month for the past two years.

FIRST STOP OF THE DAY

Over scones, coffee and hot chocolate, the two talked about business and an upcoming women's conference. "It's a lot more convenient to make that first stop in the morning than break away from the office," Carman says.

She adds that, as a member of several professional organizations, she has seen a swing away from lunch meetings to breakfast meetings. Simply put, breakfast meetings are almost always better attended, Carman says. "It comes down to convenience."

McPherson of Interactive Meeting Solutions, a California consulting and meeting facilitation company, has another theory on why breakfast meetings are on the rise: "With all the downsizing that's taking place, it's putting so much pressure on the people who are left that they're not taking a lunch anymore."

Lunch's loss has been breakfast's gain. Anderson, with J. Rolfe Davis, jokes that, if a client asks whether you "do breakfast," there's only one answer: "You always say yes. They want to know you're up at the crack of dawn and working hard on their behalf."

But the hard work doesn't have to apply to everybody. Vazquez, assistant manager of the Breakfast Club, says waiting on a table where a breakfast meeting is taking place can be a breeze. "I check on them once and leave them alone. They don't take as much work, and they're good tippers -- usually."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Breakfast gathering. Dan Needham (left to right), Larry Kreider and Fred Hall attend a breakfast meeting at the Breakfast Club of Orlando.

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