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AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Recharge! Fitness breaks benefit bodies, minds

By **KIM BERCOVITZ, PH.D.**
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Think back to your last meeting or event. How often did you feel tired? Did you get fanny fatigue and/or brain freeze? It's not uncommon. Planners attending or holding an event sit too much and hear a lot of information in a short period of time.

| Features | Benefits |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Brief | Easily inserted into program |
| At seat or break room | Convenient, social icebreaker |
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| Sweat-free | Exercise in business attire |
| Healthy break | Combats sitting/learning fatigue |
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Provides a healthy and memorable experience

Inactivity at a typical conference or full-day meeting makes brains and bodies sluggish. Muscles stiffen, posture becomes slouched, and energy and alertness levels plummet as the day wears on. They need energy boosters that recharge mind and body, and enhance concentration and information retention.

Meeting professionals traditionally use coffee breaks as energy boosters. The coffee and soft drinks usually consumed come with high-carb, sugary snacks like cookies and pastries. These don't provide the lasting pick-me-up needed midmorning and midafternoon. Coffee and snacks may be energizing for a short while, but people end up feeling more fatigued than before when the caffeine and sugar highs wear off.

Light exercise, on the other hand, increases blood flow and pumps oxygen to the brain. This keeps everyone awake and alert for longer periods of time. Fitness breaks at meetings and events (delivered in-person or by video) are a new concept. Initially met with intrigue and surprise, they usually become very well-received, particularly when they're brief, sweat-free and can be done in business attire and at participants' seats.

Typical responses: a room full of people talking, laughing, smiling, building camaraderie, stretching together and applauding themselves. Participants describe these fitness pauses as "needed breaks" and "social icebreakers," and say they feel great afterward.

Want to add fitness breaks to your agenda? Here are some tips.

Introduce exercise with enthusiasm

Moderators need to announce fitness breaks professionally and enthusiastically. This puts participants in the right frame of mind. The energy shown by the moderator will help motivate attendees to stand up and participate instead of leaving the room. Moderators should be briefed in advance about how to introduce the fitness breaks. It's a good idea to send copies of an introduction to moderators before the conference.

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Every successful program has a coach whose job it is to support, encourage and cheer people on. Conference coaches can be moderators, session chairs, conference planners, volunteers, students or attendees who have a visible presence in the main room where the fitness breaks are done or in each of the concurrent session rooms. Coaches can stretch and exercise with event participants and cheer them along.

Do it this way

The best times to schedule fitness breaks:

- **Midmorning and midafternoon.** This is when people become naturally sleepy. For many, energy drops after a big lunch.
- **Before or after keynotes, plenaries and in large rooms.** When all participants are together, they feed off the group energy.
- **Before sessions.** Have attendees stretch in their seats while they wait for a session to begin.
- **Midsession.** A spontaneous energy booster surprises participants when their energy and alertness levels flag.

Fitness breaks are less effective early in the morning or at the end of the conference day. Early-morning walks or yoga breaks, for example, tend to attract few attendees.

Energy boosters can be easily included as part of a refreshment break or in a breakout room, but they're most successful in the conference meeting room. When held during refreshment breaks, your attendees are more interested in checking their smartphones, finding the restroom, grabbing coffee or networking.

Fitness breaks that get everyone up and moving at their seats — before, during or immediately after a session — provide a healthy and memorable conference experience.

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What do you think of the idea of “fitness breaks?” Do they work for you? Please share your comments in the space below.

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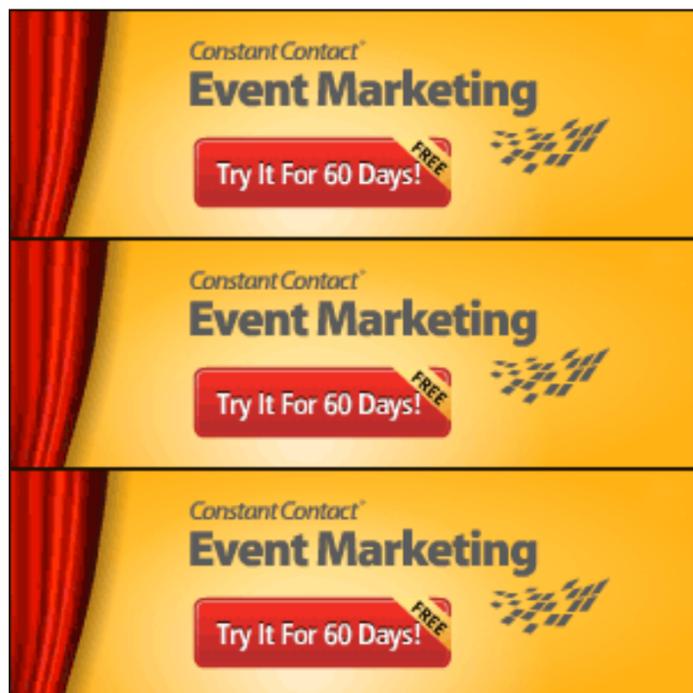
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