

crowd pleaser

What proper planning can do to ensure success at your next meeting or special event BY Nancy Crotti

Failure to carefully plan for an event or meeting can be **problematic** and **embarrassing**: A Power Point presentation doesn't work; most of the room can't hear the speaker; the food is **lousy**; everybody hates the band; attendees leave feeling that it was a **waste of their time**; the boss can't fathom why it cost so much. **Cringing yet?**

None of these scenarios needs to play out. Meeting and event experts say that to put on a successful event, you must have specific goals, know where to economize and where not to, and commit to following up.

"What you want to think about more than how much money you're going to spend, is what you want to accomplish," explains Rob Mosbacher, senior lead of conferences, events and travel for Alexandria-based Tastefully Simple.

If it's an employee event, the goals might be entertainment and appreciation. A sales event may involve motivation, teaching and entertainment. A public relations event will be about making a name for a company or highlighting one of its strengths.

Once you've identified the goal, figure out how many people you want to invite and how much you can spend on each. Those two factors will help guide the search for a venue. Planning a year in advance is ideal for booking the venue of your choice.

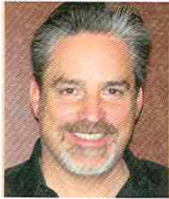
Two years ago, Fairview Health Services wanted to celebrate its 100 anniversary, but with 19,000 employees working in a variety of locations, the company had lots to consider. In the end,

it held the event at a Minnesota Twins game. "We tented a huge area outside the Dome and literally had 4,000 people out there eating hot dogs," says Char Mason of Char Mason & Associates, a St. Paul event-planning firm. "Paying for hot dogs and boxes of Cracker Jacks is a whole lot less expensive than paying for a seated dinner for 4,000."

The celebration was affordable because it tied in with an existing event, according to public relations consultant Ted Davis of St. Paul, who brought in Mason and colleague Cookie Coleman to orchestrate it. Businesses seeking to put on smaller events can do the same. "The idea is to adapt existing events to deliver your message because any organization event ultimately is a communication event," Davis says. "You're trying to tell a story or build a story or make a story."

A company that wants to make a name for itself on a certain topic might host a roundtable or sponsor an event, says Rose McKinney, president of Risdall McKinney Public Relations in New Brighton. "You have to consider if it's part of a short-term strategy with an immediate result or a long-term strategy with the goal of building visibility and having a greater presence," she says. "I think the long-term strategy pays off, but obviously it takes a lot more time. With the short-term strategy, I think you have to be more focused on what the attendees are going to get and what you are going to provide and how you are going to follow that up in some way that makes sense to your bottom line."

The content of the event is paramount, according to McKinney. "That's where the real value is for attendees, whether it's a phenomenal speaker or a hands-on presentation," she says.



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—Rob Mosbacher, Tastefully Simple

Ensuring the content portion of the event will come off smoothly may mean renting space for two days instead of one, says Cheri Macht, creative director of meetings and events at Flying Colors Inc., a video and events company in Minneapolis. That allows you to set up equipment, rehearse and trouble-shoot without last-minute panicking. “It’s a little double check for everybody and gives everyone such a heightened sense of confidence,” Macht says. “You really see it in the final product.”

Mason lists other areas where pinching pennies doesn’t pay off:

Food quality: “People will walk away from an event if the food is not of a high quality.”

Entertainment: “Don’t hire your son’s garage band.”

Parking: “When people have to park and walk long distances in high heels and formal attire, that’s the one thing that will stick in their heads.”

Registration: “Don’t have one person at registration. Have seven.”

Production: “The audio-visual component is what a lot of people get sticker shock over, but it’s highly technical.”

If all this seems overwhelming, consider the attendee’s experience, says Mosbacher. “You can really try hard to nickel and dime on a variety of things, but when it comes right down to it, you have to be committed to doing the meeting and accepting what those costs are,” he says. “If you’re not willing to pay that, you really need to evaluate what you’re doing. Be prepared that you’re going to spend something.

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—Char Mason, Char Mason & Associates



People are very appreciative of whatever it is you do for them.”

That said, there are a number of ways to cut costs. A continental breakfast meeting is less expensive than a sit-down dinner. Hold the event on a Tuesday rather than a Saturday to secure a better venue for less money. Don’t serve alcohol, or if you do, protect yourself from liability and make sure it’s a cash bar so guests will drink responsibly. Consider omitting spouses from the guest list. Use online registration to cut down on paper and postage costs. Keep track of every expense.

“You should be constantly going through an approval process,” Macht says. “That way at the end, there aren’t a lot of ugly surprises.”

Although these experts advise planning as far in advance as possible, they’ve also done successful events with less preparation time. Creative Corporate Catering of New Hope specializes in ordering and delivering restaurant-prepared meals to company meetings with only a very little notice. Companies can order online from a variety of restaurants.

“Mexican restaurants can whip up a taco bar very quickly,” says Thomas Kuehl, director of marketing. “Sandwich platters might be a little more difficult because of the time that it takes to produce something like that.”

If it’s your first event, Mosbacher advises taking a conservative approach. “It’s real easy to spend a lot of money real fast,” he says. “No one will know what to expect, so if you keep the first event modest, you can build on the experience the following year.”

McKinney advises keeping the end result in mind. “It’s important to not only think of an event itself but what happens after,” she says. “That’s where I think you get the return on your investment. Almost every organization wants to see some tie-back to the results that matter to them.” **MB**