

SELECTING THE RIGHT VENUE FOR YOUR NEXT EVENT

We're running a conference in three months", said the CEO, "Find me a really good venue and make sure we don't break the bank". So, in around twenty words, you've been promoted (or demoted) to Event Manager. You may have little or no experience in this field and training is definitely on-the-job and it starts now!

Just about everyone with space to rent is into providing a venue for all types of event. You can choose from purpose built training facilities, hotels, mansions, castles, conference halls, exhibition centers, art galleries, museums, universities and colleges. You can be sure that every one will be different and will have its own particular attributes that will make it attractive for your event. You can also be sure that the venue that best meets your needs is also very popular with other users, so early booking is essential to make sure that you are not scratching around and compromising with a venue that does not quite meet your needs. The selection process can be a nightmare because sometimes it is like comparing apples with oranges. So, before you even look, get out a blank sheet of paper and write down what your event will demand from a venue to contribute towards its success.

Here are a few suggestions:

- * On which dates will you require the venue? Do you need a rehearsal day as well as the actual event?
- * How many people do you want to invite? Do the numbers need to be flexible up and down?
- * How much parking will your event need?
- * Should the venue be within a certain distance of your office; say, a forty minute drive?
- * Is the image of the venue important? e.g. an inexpensive no-frills venue will be appropriate for that Cost Cutting Seminar whereas an Executive Selection Workshop might benefit from an up-market mansion house venue.
- * How should they be sitting? Lecture style, Conference style, Restaurant Style? With or without tables? Maybe on bean bags?
- * Will you have a projection screen? How big will it be?
- * How will the stage be arranged?
- * What sound and visual aids will your presenters be using? Will you provide video, overhead or slide projectors and a sound system or will you expect the venue to do this?
- * Will your delegates need overnight accommodation on site or close by?
- * Do you need break-out rooms for smaller discussions?
- * Do you need an assembly area for event registration, an information exhibition and coffee breaks?
- * If a meal is included in the event, will it be a buffet or a sit-down meal?
- * Do you need early or late access to the venue for preparation, assembly and dismantling purposes?
- * How many power points do you need and where in the room should they be.
- * Do you need outdoor space for Icebreaker activities? Will the Icebreaker suppliers require additional facilities?
- * Do you need refreshments on the delegate tables and do they need to be refilled at every break?
- * What cost per delegate must you not exceed?

Some of this information may not be available in detail at an early stage in the project, however you should make an educated guess and, if anything, over-specify to ensure that your venue will be more than capable of fulfilling your needs.

Armed with your detailed specification, you can now do some desk research using recommendations, Yellow Pages and the internet to draw up a long list of potential venues. Call each venue by telephone to check that they meet the basic requirements; they have appropriate rooms available on the dates you specify, they can provide the additional services and they are within your cost parameters. These calls will immediately shorten your list and you may be left with only a handful that you need to visit, preferably with a colleague, with a view to rating them against your criteria.

Bringing a colleague with you, especially someone who specializes in being skeptical, will prevent you from being totally consumed by a good sales pitch and will give you time to look at the small details.

Using this process usually generates a clear winner but if you are fortunate enough to have two or three venues to choose from, select the venue that is staffed by a team you believe that will work most effectively with your own team.

Don't ever be fooled by how simple the CEO makes it sound; venue finding is a serious and time-consuming business and can mean the difference between success and failure for your conference, workshop, roadshow or seminar. With a little thinking time, the right questions and, of course, the right information you'll feel better equipped and more confident that the venue you choose really meets the requirements.