

Special Report: Successful Event Planning for your Company Party or Banquet

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The difference between a great event and an average party can be very elusive to many company party organizers. You want your guests to enjoy themselves. You want the event to be unique, fun and a hit with your friends and co-workers, and you want people to leave with positive memories and a feeling of being glad that they came. As challenging as it is to put a successful event together, this should be a fun process and it can all smoothly come together by following a few simple guidelines.

There are many locations that host lovely parties and once your group's size is established you can look for a meeting room that is ideal. Event centers, ballrooms, hotels and restaurants offer meeting rooms and dinners at a wide range of costs. Figure \$12-\$15 for lower priced menus and \$18-\$28 for fine dining. Of course you can also find many places that will give you a superb dinner and atmosphere for much more.

A great atmosphere and quality of food is a big part of the success of an event but as we will discuss soon, that may not be the single most important consideration is the success of a company banquet or party.

Don't let the high cost fool you. You can have a very successful event on a smaller budget. I have been a part of many very wonderful events and company parties that have been held at the office and these were economically catered with very tasty food and the crowd had a blast.

Probably the reason that buffets are very popular for this type of event is at least the guest can choose what they like and is often hotter than food that is brought out on a covered plate.

The Number One Key to a Great Event!

Step back and consider some of the events you have attended and what made it great. It comes down to the people having fun together. There are ways to instigate fun and bring humor into a party that will make all the difference.

Someone I admire a lot said, "When was the last time you, or someone you know, said, "Wow, that Chicken Kiev was sure awesome 3 weeks ago at the office party." Chances are the food was good, but not outstanding or memorable as the waiters brought it in on covered patters that were put together an hour before and held in heating racks in the back room. Food, decoration or the hall have little to do with what makes an event memorable or the successful.

The number one factor to an event's success is as simple as selecting the right after-dinner entertainment. Many entertainment committees will spend much time and resources on the menu and decorations and this adds positively to the atmosphere of the event, but what your guests will remember and still talk about weeks after, will be the laughter they had and the real team building fun of an excellent entertainer. This sounds simple and easy. The following are some tips to help bring this all together and make your next event very successful.

First, by entertainment, we are not talking here about a D.J. or a band. This is basically background entertainment and adds to the event in many ways. But people can still have fun with even an average D.J. as things can keep moving by selecting a few good tunes. For tips on selecting a great D. J. look for another article on this topic and some recommendations. I have observed many events where when the band starts half the audience leaves as it is loud or not to their taste.

The #1 key to a wonderful event is bringing in an after dinner entertainer that grabs your audience's attention and brings them together. This is the expertise of a comedy entertainer who skillfully works the room. Discovering a great entertainer for your event is your challenge and can be a daunting task. The rest of this article will present many suggestions that will help give your event a very strong and positive outcome.

Finding Entertainment

There are several methods to finding quality after dinner entertainment. The main two ways are through a quality entertainment agency or going directly to the entertainer and hiring that person independently.

You can discover options for agencies or entertainers by recommendation of other meeting planners, through the internet or by directories.

Sadly, many amateur acts, hobbyist or inexperienced acts also advertise in phone books and a few agents will even book low priced entertainers of moderate quality so they can add on a higher booking fee.

You can have great success in choosing to use an agent or hiring an act directly if approached properly.

The main thing you will need from an act or agent is a full publicity package. This packet should have a DVD of the act, a brochure and letters from other groups who have enjoyed the program. Even better are the u-tube videos that you can see right away on the performer's website.

The video from the act will typically run 3-8 minutes. Be aware that this can be doctored to show only a few highlight moments from the act with quick camera cuts and lots of jumping around from scene to scene. A good DVD will include several complete segments from the act that run a minute or two each. This will show how the audience is reacting to the performer and how the act does a complete routine. A good promotional video will not be full of jump cuts like MTV or a commercial, it is not made for TV but more of a chance to stand in the back of the room and observe how a real audience is reacting to a real performance.

Working with Agents

I have worked with entertainment agencies for many years and have a high regard for the reputable ones. A good agent will have a nice list of suitable entertainers. An agent can give you many ideas of acts that you might not have heard of and help to recommend several choices of good entertainer who will suit your group. The agent may also recommend several acts that you had never heard of or considered yet might make a very good fit for your company banquet.

For example, there is a comedy duo in Minnesota who do a Norwegian act that is hilarious. There are several other acts trying to do a similar act that and are nowhere

near the comedy level. This goes for acts such as magicians, stand up comedians, and improvisation troupes. A reputable agent can direct you to a quality entertainer.

An agent is somewhat limited by the list of acts they represent and this list may not include the best or most appropriate entertainers for your event. Some agents only have a rough idea of what each act does and some agent might unintentionally misrepresent what an act can do.

A reputable agent will want to work with you over and over again and will strive to get you a great act. You will be able to choose from several entertainers who would be effective for your event.

Don't wait until the last minute as selection will be limited. Get your entertainment booked early, as many company holiday parties and banquets happen on the same three weekends in December. Many corporate parties have also moved their holiday parties into the New Year so in January these events also fall on the same two or three weekends. If you find a good entertainment match, get it booked. There are only so many Friday and Saturday nights available in the entertainer's calendar. Once you have the act booked, you can rest at ease as you put together the other items for your event.

Hiring an Act Directly

There are advantages to hiring an entertainer directly. You can discover more about what they do and how their act would fit with your group's event. You can get direct answers to questions and probably much more information than going through an agent. You also get a feel for this entertainer and how they will work with you. Of course an agent will be able to brag more about the artist that the artist themselves would.

When you speak with the performer directly, he or she can tell you much more specific information about the act than an agent can. He can recommend specific routines for your particular audience and can let you know from experience where in your evening his entertainment would best fit.

An act may be able to tailor their routine a bit to fit your group or theme. The artist may ask specific questions about your event and that will help them to discover how to make their act a better fit. I ask several questions that help me tailor the show to the event once the program is booked.

If you have seen an entertainer at another event and know that you would like to book them for your event, it is ethical to use the agent that booked them into this event. Ask the artist after the show and they will be able to get you a card from that agent so you can proceed.

Seeing the artist perform is the best way to know that it is a great show for your next event. I have many people come up after my presentations and ask for a card. Half my work comes from word of mouth and repeat performances.

Be a bit skeptical about big claims by agents or acts. One magician claims to be David Copperfield's opening act. Well, David Copperfield never has an opening act that is a magician. This fellow probably did some magic in the lobby for his own friends before the show and put that he was the opening act on the list of his grand accomplishments. Getting ones photo taken with a star does not mean the star is giving an endorsement, they may be taking pictures with anyone who comes up after their show.

Check references on an act that has a flashy video with lots of short clips but no complete routines from the act or an act that has a website full of acclaim and awards given out by clubs but little in the way of recommendations from other corporate clients. You want to see other groups like yours that have been successfully entertained by this artist and will give nice testimonials about the quality of the show.

Watching the Promotional Video

When you watch the DVD of the artist, listen not only to the act, but also to the response of the audience. A red flag should go up if the act is performed in a studio without an audience or if you see just small "snippets" of the act that are slickly edited together. A series of short clips from the act that show a laugh here then over to a laugh somewhere else will now give you a good idea of the quality of the act.

One act has a promotional video where the strongest laugh in the whole video comes from an audience member making a comment. That audience member will not be at your show delivering that funny comment. Is the act getting a one laugh after another in a complete routine? This way you know you are hiring a quality presentation that is experienced and professional.

Just watch for the claims and check if they are legitimate. One act talks about working on cruise ships, but they actually were part of the volunteer talent show one night that is put on by the people paying to ride on the cruise..

A promotional kit will not include a DVD of the whole show because that would waste your time and artists are concerned about other acts stealing their original funny material. It will contain a few select routines to give you a taste of the acts style and quality. These may or may not be shortened a bit but the promotional video should not rely of editing to make it look good and it will not be what you are used to on television with 6 or 7 camera angles and lots of cutting between, so it is not a typical TV experience. It is a view as if you were standing in the back of the room observing a live audience enjoying the show.

Clean Comedy

You will want to be careful also in the selection of an entertainer who does "blue" or "risqué" material. This act may get laughs, but it may end up being a bad reflection on you, your company or organization. I received a wonderful comment from two women who were part of an event at a company party at a country club a few years ago. They were both kindly praising the performance and one said, "You were just as funny as the guy we had last night only there was no sexism, racism and dirty talk." Thank you. As my friend Adam Christing who started the Clean Comedians group said, "You don't have to be filthy to be funny."

Red Skelton was the king of the golden TV age and he did his live act very clean, yet the audience was in tears of laughter. People sometimes forget that good clean humor is not only good but it is good for you. I feel that people need to be treated with

respect by the performer and many audience members will have to work together the next week in a positive way, so an act that is rude or disrespectful may sour a work place. A quality show should leave people with a wonderful warm glow from the laughter and a desire to see more.

Contracting you Act

When you have made a decision as to which act you want to go with, you should enter into a contract with them as soon as possible. As mentioned above, there are several prime time dates that book quickly and you will want to act once you have made the decision. I have had a bank book me 12 months in advance for a return engagement and this is typical with many good acts. So do not delay if you want to proceed. Asking the performer or agent to simply "hold" a date is not enough – if you do not have a signed contract the act is not obligated to your event and is free to take a "sure thing" should it arise. Remember, you are hiring the best -- others will be looking to bring the best to their event also.

Some acts cost more than others. You do get what you pay for. Price will be based on the quality and demand for the performer. You want an artist with experience and excellence in performance.

If you discover that the act you want is beyond your budget be open with the agent or artist and let them know what your budget is. They might be able to make an arraignment or suggest ways of saving you money. If you are spending \$20 a person for food that may not be that memorable, certainly don't skimp on the performer's fee. The agent or artist knows what they are worth and to maintain their reputation in the industry, they need to keep consistent with their fees. If your get a special deal or discount compared to what was charged to their last group this is just bad business.

When you are set with a contract ask the act or agent to send a list of requirement for performance. These are things that will make the show a success and

help it run smoothly. This list might include size of stage needed or microphone requirements.

One quick thing to consider in event selection is parking. Discover if the hotel charges guests for parking, as some have a fee of up to \$12 per car that your guests must pay before they even step into the “free” event.

Decorations and Setting

Decorations can be fancy or frugal, but in the dim light of a banquet room you might find that spending a lot may not add anything to the event. A simple yet elegant option is to place a candle on an 8” square mirror at the center of each table. Helium balloons can be designed in beautiful ways such as arches and in other festive ways, but consider the inability of people to see the speaker or president of the company as these may block the sight lines to the stage if the balloons are floating up from the center of each table. Decoration suggestions will be covered in another article.

Very Important Benefits of Sound and Light

Sound and light are your two most important things to a successful show. The act needs to be seen and heard. The stage should not be of in the corner or behind the desert buffet. Your audience will enjoy the act best if they can see and hear it. Have the tables as close to the stage as possible ideally 7-10 feet away at the most. It is best not to seat people to the sides of the stage as they will miss out on what is happening. This is a short paragraph, but one of the most important.

You can relax knowing that you did your best to make the show a fun and memorable event.

Norm Knight is a Comedy Hypnotist who brings an exciting presentation to corporate events. See how he can bring dynamic entertainment to your group.