

# Top tips for a smooth running stress-free event

Events come in all different shapes and sizes but the basic principles of organising them are the same. The key to a successful event is making sure it's well planned. The hard work should all be done in the run up, leaving you free to enjoy the day, welcome a great turn out of guests and quickly resolve any genuinely unforeseeable issues. The following is a checklist of important issues that need to be addressed in the event planning process:

## Objectives

Decide what the point of the event is before you do anything else! Are you raising awareness of your services within the community, sharing best practice, recruiting volunteers or launching a new project? These are just a few examples of the types of event you might organise, but there are many others. Whatever your goal, the purpose of your event has to be clear to others; they need a good reason to spend their time, and possibly money, on attending.

## Target audience

Thinking about your target audience is critical to selecting an appropriate date, time and venue for your event. Draw up an audience profile that you can refer back to when making these decisions. Consider things like the expected number of attendees, where they will be travelling from, their occupations, their information needs, demographics, work and family commitments, whether they know each other and their potential level of spend. This is a guide rather than a definitive list – there may well be other considerations that are relevant to your particular event.

## Event outline

Drawing up a brief outline of how you envisage the event at the start of the process will help you with a number of other tasks; determining an appropriate venue, securing speakers and promoting the event to attendees, for example. Note down in a couple of paragraphs the overall aim of the event, the target audience profile and the various benefits of attendance, an indication of the date, timings and location (even if these are still to be finalised) along with an outline programme (proposed activities, or speakers and their subjects). Once you have drafted this, take a moment to reflect on whether the outline programme really will deliver the promised benefits for your target audience.

## Resources

### People

Identify the people you have available to work on the event, remembering your volunteers as well as paid staff. Produce an action plan and assign people to specific tasks, then use this in update meetings to track progress.

### Finance

Calculate your likely expenditure and, if appropriate, how much you will need to charge attendees in order to offset it. Remember to think broadly about expenditure; venue hire, displays, entertainment, promotional flyers, advertising space, programmes, handouts, stationery, travel, photography, catering, audio visual equipment, speaker expenses, parking, signage, security, cloakrooms, accommodation, phone calls/ internet use, staging and furniture etc. Factor in 5-10 per cent of your anticipated expenditure as contingency for unexpected costs, monitor your spend throughout and there should be no nasty surprises.

You may be able to get financial help for your event through sponsorship from a local business. Sponsorship is a commercial transaction in which you receive financial remuneration in return for networking/ branding/ promotional opportunities. Think about what you have to offer and perhaps create more than one package, allowing you to have a range of sponsors. Researching the companies you intend to approach will help you tailor your offering, making it more attractive. Be prepared to negotiate over price and to build a personalised package around your sponsor's needs, but ensure that you are clear about any legal implications resulting from the benefits to the sponsor i.e. data protection or VAT implications.

If sponsorship is not an option then you could consider asking for gifts in kind such as free printing, the loan of equipment or the use of their premises. If you don't ask you don't get, and this is a great way to stretch a small budget. In fact sometimes a gift in kind can equate to a larger financial sum than sponsorship. Failing that, it is always worth asking for a discounted charity rate.

## Venue

### Ideas

Venue ideas can be sourced from: convention or visitor bureaux; directories such as *the blue and green books*; specialist agencies; event industry associations like the British Association of Conference Destinations; trade exhibitions like Confex. Be creative with your venue planning. You don't always have to go with a conventional option but could do something a bit out of the ordinary instead, so long as it suits your event. For example, a breakfast reception at a local restaurant, out of hours, or an event at a museum.

## Shortlisting

It's useful to pull together a list of essential attributes and desirable attributes. Usually the main factors in choosing a venue are location, room capacities, transport links and accessibility, but you may have others. Create a shortlist of venues based on your key requirements and then do a site visit to each. During a site visit you should be noting things like the state of the décor, cleanliness, ambience, acoustics, temperature control, lighting, signage, and the proximity of the rooms to toilets, car parks and fresh air.

## Accessibility

Keep in mind that the venue must be accessible for everyone. Think about getting there and getting in as well as getting around. Walk the route that a wheelchair user would use; sometimes venues labelled as technically wheelchair accessible can still be awkward for a wheelchair user to get around. Are there lifts to all floors, disabled parking bays and disabled toilets? Do rooms have induction loops for people with hearing impairments?

## Cost comparisons

Different venues will have different pricing structures. Smaller community venues may charge by the hour rather than the day. Larger conference venues might offer a 'daily

delegate rate' (DDR), which includes everything i.e. venue hire, equipment, catering and so on. Others will cost the different elements separately. It's therefore important not to go with your first impression but to work out the true cost of running your event at each venue. The minimum numbers you can contract to and the cancellation penalties will also vary from venue to venue, meaning each will entail different levels of financial risk.

## Publicity

Try to publicise your event as early as possible, especially to key people, and ideally around eight weeks out. Work backwards from your event date –factoring in production time for any printed materials – to establish when you need to have all the main details agreed by. Announce further information online or by email as and when things are confirmed, which also serves as a reminder for people to register. Let the media know about your event in advance as well. To increase the chance of them covering it, consider picking a day that fits with their publication schedule.

## Signage

Good signs will help attendees move around an unfamiliar venue quickly and without getting lost. Check whether the fixed signage at your venue is adequate for your needs. If not, ask whether they will produce event-specific signage for you if you provide your logo, or whether you are allowed to fix your own signage to the walls.

## **Equipment**

In advance of your event make sure you work out what your audio visual and specialist equipment (e.g. induction loops) needs are, and either hire it from the venue or ensure you have your own available to take with you. On the day, check and double check that the equipment is in working order and that you or somebody reliable knows how to work it. If you are hiring equipment that you are unfamiliar with, it might be worth paying for an AV technician to be available throughout your event.

## **Branding**

Whether the event is held at your own office or elsewhere, it's important to create the right impression. Branded materials can make an event feel more professional, and might include goody or delegate bags, pens, banner stands or balloons for outdoor events. Searching online for 'promotional merchandise' will generate a list of many companies that could produce these for you.

## **Rehearsals**

Wherever possible, ensure you have a proper run-through of your event. This is particularly important if you are holding an awards ceremony or something like it that involves lots of movement on and off stage, and several different speeches. You may be surprised about how long some of these last and need to alter your timings (or the speeches) accordingly. When your schedule is 100% finalised, write up a detailed version and circulate it to all involved. Clarity about where everyone needs to be and when will help people feel more confident on stage, and will also avoid the likelihood of awkward pauses.

## **Photography and filming**

Hire a good photographer to capture key moments at your event. This might be the Mayor thanking volunteers, a ribbon being cut, a cheque handed over or an award given. Photos are handy to have for funding bids and annual reviews. If your event becomes an annual activity they will also be useful for the next year's promotional material. If you plan to film your event do check with the venue first whether this is permitted. The venue may have other clients using the premises who do not wish to be filmed.

## **Contingencies**

Even the best laid plans can go to waste. Try to anticipate where problems might arise and have a back-up plan ready, for example moving an event indoors due to bad weather, replacing a late/ ill speaker at short notice or simply having some blank name badges for unexpected guests. Keep the phone numbers of local taxi firms to hand, and make sure you know where the nearest A&E department is in case of an emergency.

## After the event

### Thanks

Send formal written thank you letters to people who have worked extensively on the event, sponsors and speakers, and be sure to do it promptly. This is crucial for relationship building and future activities the event may foster.

### Evaluation

The scale of your event will determine the extent of the evaluation and the method used. A formal evaluation will ask attendees – either via a questionnaire form or online survey – about their satisfaction levels with the venue, speakers, catering, access, parking, publicity and pre-event information. A round-table debrief with key people involved in the event is often also very useful, as is a quick phone conversation with suppliers.

Aim to write a post-event report, even if it is brief. This can assist with future events by helping you avoid mistakes (so don't white wash them) and build on successes. It's important to address the budget (and particularly any areas of overspend): highlight where additional funds should be sought for future events as well as areas where allocated funds were not needed.

