



THROW THE PERFECT PARTY

WHETHER IT'S A BIRTHDAY FOR 50 OR FUNDRAISER FOR 500, HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO MAKE YOUR EVENT A SMASHING SUCCESS.

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BUZZ-WORTHY ENTERTAINMENT

Whether you want classical, country or something in between, entertainment is going to set the tone for your party. Before booking, make sure you've heard the band's music. A CD or DVD to preview them is acceptable, but, "If you can see them live, it's always a better opportunity," says Jodi Wolf, president of Paulette Wolf Events and Entertainment Inc. "Try to see them in the environment you're going to be putting them in. Going to see them at some club performing for the public is very different than seeing them perform for a social or corporate event."

Tina Carlson, president of Chicago events planning firm Ivan Carlson & Associates, recommends asking the band if they have any discounts they specifically offer. As for the master of ceremonies, Tina notes that a band member or DJ is great, but on-air personalities from TV or radio can lend an air of local celebrity. "Typically there's a fee, but some of them have personal causes or personal relationships they like to help support." She encourages booking as early as six months in advance and advises holding the event on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday if you're trying to save money. "If you want more availability in terms of what kind of bands or who's available to you, the day of the week absolutely would help," she says.

When accommodating for the band, Tina recommends providing a room with refreshments so they can relax. Brief them on your guests' expectations and review a program with them so they know the night's events. And finally, consider in advance if you want the entertainment to have access to the buffet and bar, as that will affect both budget and tone of the event.

EVENTS ON A BUDGET

With the present state of the economy, designers and planners are aware of clients' desire to save money. Michelle Durpetti, CEO and founder of the full-service events planning firm McGowan Durpetti & Associates, observes, "People are a little more particular. Budgets are the heart and soul of an event." If you want to stick with a printed invite, Michelle urges choosing digital printing over engraving or a letterpress. If that's still too pricey, both Michelle and Jodi recommend electronic invitations. Your invite will not only look fabulous and save you money, but is also a paper-saving, green choice.

Venue selection is of the utmost importance when trying to cut costs. Both planners suggest looking for a venue that's in season or already has the kind of décor you want. With many of the decorations already in place, you save money and time. Chelsea Polk, event producer for event décor and design company Kehoe Designs, says you can also reduce expenses on setup design. "For your cocktail hour, you can do one great buffet or bar focal arrangement to enhance the environment, then do something more simple like votive candles for cocktail tables."

To save on food and drinks, Jodi recommends "reducing the amount of time you're passing hors d'oeuvres so the guests still get the experience, but the caterer doesn't go through as much food." Jodi and Michelle also advise serving specific drinks versus a full bar. And if you want to cut costs on music, both women agree: hook up the iPod and dance the night away.

THE RIGHT INVITE

Sending out the right invitations can be a lot of pressure. They're your

guests' first impression of your event.

"Invitations say a lot about you and give your guests insight into the kind of experience they will have," says Andrea Liss, president and founder for Hannah Handmade, an award-winning design firm known for their couture invitations. "The style and quality of your invitation is a reflection of your style and design savvy." Andrea mentions current popular colors range from rich, saturated colors to soft pastels to eco-neutrals.

In the case you'll be requiring an RSVP, Andrea notes that casual and business events can be done via email or by phone. However, for more formal and social events, Colin Falco, owner of Pulp & Ink, an Old Town boutique offering high-end custom invitations and design services, says it's important to send a required RSVP card. Online invitations fall into the same category with casual events; Andrea notes that while email is a great way to correspond, a paper invitation sets your event apart and is a special keepsake for your guest.

Andrea and Colin both agree that a Save the Date is invaluable. "Even if you don't know the venue, but, for example, you know it's going to be in Chicago, you can send them a Save the Date," Colin says. "You should mail it six months in advance."

SETTING THE STAGE: LIGHTING AND SOUND

"The success of any event can heavily be [relied] on with lighting and décor," says Dennis Remer, account representative for Frost, a multi-media lighting and staging company. "Whether that be in a tent [or] a venue, the lighting and the production play a strong role in creating the environment to set the mood and support a theme."

Chelsea Polk, event producer for Kehoe Designs, agrees. She says they prefer their client to figure out the theme, mood or message they're trying to convey; then, they help that vision become a reality.

"For weddings, we typically find the focal points that the bride and groom want to showcase and highlight them with various types of lighting," says Chelsea. "Corporate events can sometimes require more creative yet effective lighting due to company presentations, stage atmospheres, room environments and design. Social parties typically push the envelope a little more and frequently utilize intelligent lighting that moves, changes colors and creates patterns in various areas of the room."

And don't forget about the music. If a DJ is required, Dennis suggests auditioning no more than three DJs to avoid being overwhelmed by options. Ask for a link to their Web site or a CD, and consider attending an event at which they're playing to get a sense of the DJ's style.

CHOOSING A VENUE

It can be tricky choosing a venue for your event because you want it just right. Katie Hall, venue manager at Chicago event space Gallery 1028, suggests making your event personal so you can get what you really want.

"Given the recession, the events people are hosting nowadays are definitely more personal," says Katie. "If it's corporate or social, I think you have to think about the guests and who the event is going to be for."

Katie notes that Saturdays in the month of May to November are most popular and generally get booked quickly, especially for events such as weddings. However, corporate and non-profit events usually take place on weekdays.

Julie Darling, owner of Julie Darling, Inc., says it's best to book

an event as early as possible to make sure the date is safe and secure. She also notes that a tent is ideal for an outdoor event as an alternative plan in case of rain. She also suggests to not exceed your capacity requirement for the venue. "If the venue says that they have room for 250 people standing or 200 seated, you want to stick to that. Your guests will be uncomfortable otherwise," Julie says.

THAT SOMETHING SPECIAL

We've all gone to gala after gala, party after party with the same passé themes and drab giveaways. We talked to party planning experts for tips on how to make your event one to remember.

One duty of a host or hostess is to get her guests to mingle, say our experts. Including interactive elements into the event makes this a snap. Michelle Durpetti, of McGowan Durpetti & Associates, says one way to do this is to ditch the old place cards. Instead, projecting an artsy seating chart on the wall will allow guests to gather around, admire its beauty and chat while they find their placement.

Having your caterers pull double duty, leaving the kitchen open for guests to observe the cooking process or hiring magicians or dancers to circulate the room are other ways to keep guests on their toes.

"The elements should allow guests to see, taste and hear everything – so they are truly a part of the event and can carry on that experience to share with friends and family," says Lindsay Hays, president of Grace Public Relations, a boutique firm focusing on lifestyle industries.

Once you're sure your guests will leave with a few new friends, you can also keep them talking about your event by sending them off with a giveaway. A good giveaway is simple, but memorable, according to Lindsay.

"Gift bags full of paper certificates or giveaways are a bit passé," Lindsay says. She recommends something simple and – most importantly – purse or pocket-sized, like chocolates in small, decorative tins.

If you're on a budget, Clint Paton, CEO of Revel Décor, a boutique experiential design business, suggests repurposing materials already at hand. "For example," he says, "we would suggest to Teknion, a furniture maker, to use some of their fabric for chairs and make them into bags."

Another trend is giving money to charity in the name of your guests. Michelle says that often, charities will give special packages so you can give your guests cards or t-shirts in honor of the contribution.

TRENDS IN FOOD, DRINK AND DESIGN

It's back to basics in terms of catering. Gone are the days of far-out molecular gastronomy or small plates that require almost as much money to rent all the vessels as food itself.

"The little plate is evolving into creating a little platform for taste," John Calihan, president of Calihan Catering, says. "So it may have two or three items that will wake up the palate and provide an individual with something new or not anticipated."

People are also moving toward high quality but simple organic, sustainable and locally grown food. Just don't call it a trend.

"Organic is less of a trend and actually more of a way of life for a lot of people," says Ted Grady, co-owner and event planner with J&L Catering. "I think people really want to support local purveyors, and I don't think that will change."

A good party would be nothing without the right cocktails, which should vary depending on the event. John says at personal events, it's acceptable to simply serve beer, wine and soft drinks. If you're hosting a gala or fundraiser, however, it's best to provide a full bar.

"If you want people to open their checkbooks, you've got to give them what they want to drink," John says.

For the in-between, many people serve beer, wine and a signature cocktail, which provides a sense of something new. Signature cocktails are great for events because people are often more adventurous when they go



above An event space by Frost Chicago.

out, looking for something they won't mix at home. The unique drinks also serve as great conversation pieces, Ted says.

According to John, bourbon is the new vodka. "The big trend coming from East Coast is brown liquor – whiskey, bourbon and scotch. It's a look back in history at what took place in the '20s, '30s and '40s. Those drinks are getting new life." John also suggests a signature cocktail be served in small glasses to eliminate waste in case some people don't like them.

As opposed to dining, design trends are moving toward more extravagance. Hosts are looking to 'fill up' the room visually, which means lush floral arrangements and new takes on furniture, says Erin McDonald, vice president of design and sales for Heffernan Morgan, a high-end event planning and design firm.

In terms of seating and tabletops, Erin says denim will be hot for summer, and lounge seating as opposed to traditional seating will remain trendy for the adventurous.

"It's very relaxing, but it's a hit or miss," Erin says. "Some people love it and some people hate it. I think people across the country don't know how to think outside the box. It can be confusing walking into a room full of furniture."

Lush floral arrangements also reign today, and as do unique props that add flair. "You can really add interesting architectural elements with props from your vendor that supplement your flowers," says Allison Denny, a wedding consultant and principle with Stems, a Chicago-based custom florist.

And if you're wondering what to do with all those arrangements at the end of the night, David Rothstein, owner of David Rothstein Music, suggests donating them to nursing homes, hospitals and women's shelters. He started offering the service, Share the Love, at events where he performs and says it's a great note on which to end your celebration.

"It's important to share your happiness with other people who may not have the same opportunities," he says. "I think it's really good karma." n

FAN FAVORITE VENUE CHOICES

Where do Chicago's premier party planners love to throw a soiree?

Tina Carlson, President, Ivan Carlson & Associates

Navy Pier "It's a great facility and has a lot to offer in terms of different spaces, from the Skyline Terrace to the Grand Ballroom."

Rooftop at Millennium Park "It's a great space. It has a beautiful view of the city right there in the heart of all things."

Field Museum "It's a world-class museum and they do everything they can to make sure it's easy to do special events there."

Jodi Wolf, President, Paulette Wolf Events and Entertainment Inc.

Millennium Park "It has a lot of logistical, different things, but it's so Chicago, so iconic and so beautiful. It's a very magical place to do an event."

Chicago Illuminating Company "I've done dozens of events there, and each has felt different even though it was in the exact same space."

House of Blues "If you go to House of Blues, you don't need décor. It already has it built in for you."

Michelle Durpetti, CEO & Founder, McGowan Durpetti & Associates

Galleria Marchetti "The staff is so accommodating and knowledgeable; they're like working with family, and the food is out of this world. It's a really gorgeous space."

Café Brauer "For me it's really fun to work with venues with character. That ceiling is fabulous and the location right there in Lincoln Park is beautiful."

Chelsea Polk, Event Producer, Kehoe Designs

Ravinia "You can do a tent party out on the lawn during an amazing concert or a sit down dinner or large social party in their private event space."

The Modern Wing at the Art Institute of Chicago "It offers a spectacular view with a stunning, contemporary environment. From Griffin Court's high ceilings to Bluhm Terrace's view, it's perfect for those who want something sleek, modern and unique in the heart of downtown Chicago."



opening page The Empire Room at the Palmer House Hilton. above left and right Steppenwolf Gala 2010. Décor by Heffernan Morgan. Catering by Lime-light. Photos by Kyle Flubacker. below right Invitation by Pulp & Ink.