

Selecting the Best Facility for Your Function

The key to a successful event is communications. Not marketing, but communications with the facility you will be using; and it begins with the site selection process. The nicest hotel in town may, or may not, be the right space for you: by communicating clearly *all* of the needs of your event, you and the facility will know from the start whether or not they are the right fit. As a Certified Meeting Professional with 25-years of nonprofit event experience, here are some of the steps I would recommend in selecting the appropriate facility for your next event:

1. Even if you live in the town where the event will be held, consider talking with the local Convention and Visitors Bureau. They are in a position to know about all of the available facilities in an area and can help by distributing a request for proposal to the facilities that they know will be able to accommodate the space needs of your event. When distributing your request for proposal, try to allow a couple of weeks for facilities to respond.
2. Be as flexible as possible with the date(s) of your event. If there are certain “blackout” dates you can’t hold your functions, be sure to let the facilities know. Otherwise, the more flexible you can be the better. At a hotel, if you are holding an event without using many sleeping rooms you should be prepared to work with the hotel to fit their occupancy patterns (or be prepared to pay more). If there’s a large convention in town, it’s likely a hotel will have sold most of their sleeping rooms but may very well have empty meeting rooms available at a bargain.
3. Be sure to let potential facilities know the objective(s) of your function. If you are looking for space for an executive retreat or a donor reception you may want a more intimate setting than the mega-convention center. But don’t be surprised if the mega-convention centers, or even the local racetrack, have some nice intimate spaces available.
4. Communicate as much detail as possible regarding the agenda and space requirements for every part of your event. Be sure to include time that you need to have access to the facility prior to and following the official event times. Don’t forget the space you need for the event office, VIP green rooms, registration, vendor/sponsor tables, etc. Include details you have on past event history, especially attendance numbers. Be specific in your seating needs: space for 300 at a reception is a lot different than the space needed for 300 to sit down for dinner. (*See description of different types of seating on the next page.*)
5. Note all food and beverage functions related to your event. If you have a history for the event, share details on past budgets or menus so the facility can have an idea of your expectations. If you are planning to spend more or less than in the past, if the talk at last year’s event was all about the horrible menu, or if forty percent of your attendees are vegan, be sure to let them know. If you are planning on a bar, determine early on whether it will be a host bar or a cash bar as it makes a difference in pricing and staffing needs. Also note, *generally* you should not have to pay room rental for the space where you are holding food and beverage events.
6. Communicate all known audio/visual needs. Note that some facilities require that you use their in-house vendor, which can be good and bad: they know all of the capabilities and quirks of the system, but their prices tend to be higher than independent vendors. If you are planning to work with an outside vendor, confirm what access or patch fees the facility may charge. Sometimes the patch fees are so high you might want to have your vendor bring the complete sound system so you don’t have to access the facility’s system at all. Be sure to discuss wireless access: if there is any chance your presenter will want to access the internet it’s best to know about those costs ahead of time.
7. If your group needs sleeping rooms, try to let the facility know what the arrival and departure pattern typically is and provide them with your most accurate expectations for room pick-up. Though you want to be sure you have enough rooms available for your participants, try not to block more rooms than you know you’ll need: attrition fees are very popular with hotels, and very pricey for unwary planners. Generally, if you are using a large proportion of a hotel’s sleeping rooms you should need to pay little to nothing for your meeting space.

Following these steps won’t necessarily end every headache at your next event, but they should minimize the problems caused by lack of communication.

Typical Event Seating Configurations

Banquet Style:

Round tables with eight (60" rounds) or ten (72" rounds) people seated per table. If you are selling "tables" at your event, be sure which size will be used.

Classroom or Schoolroom Style:

All participants are seated at tables facing the front of the room. Three people per six-foot table is standard at most facilities. If your participants have lots of materials, specify two people per six-foot table.

Conference Style:

Participants are seated around a large rectangular table.

Crescent Rounds:

Five or six people are seated at a banquet table with space left open on the front side of the table so people can easily see the presenter(s) but still talk with their tablemates.

Hollow Square:

Tables are set up in a square with chairs arranged around the outside edge.

Modified Classroom:

Tables are set perpendicular to the front of the room with participants seated on both sides of the tables and their chairs angled toward the front of the room.

Reception Style:

Limited seating at banquet tables, small cocktail rounds, or stand-up cocktail rounds. This type of set-up encourages mingling by not having enough seats for everyone to be seated at one time.

Theater Style:

Rows of chairs facing the front of the room with no tables set up.

U-shaped:

Participants are seated around rectangular tables set up in a U-shape. Additional seating may be gained by placing people on the inside legs of the "U".