

Tips on how to run a successful conference or seminar:

It is very important to make sure that any business event that you are planning on having is successful and is a return on investment. I will outline in short articles the factors to consider in having a successful conference or seminar, these will be written under the following headings:

1. *Corporate reasons for having a conference*
2. *How to plan for a conference*
3. *Budgeting for a conference*
4. *Finding the right venue*
5. *Marketing for a conference*
6. *Event management and logistics (in several parts)*
 - a. *Invitations, registration and transport*
 - b. *Accommodation considerations*
 - c. *Venue liaison and room setup*
 - d. *Banqueting – food & beverage*
7. *Conference on-site logistics*
8. *Review of the conference and follow up*

Part 6D Banqueting – Food & Beverage

The previous fact sheets reviewed the corporate reasons for having a conference, and how to plan and market a successful conference. There can be many business reasons why a company should consider having a conference, not least are that events are an important part of the marketing mix. The event logistics and management is a large area to cover so we will cover this in several sections. In this section, part D we cover banqueting and all things to do with food and beverage.

Banqueting – food and beverage

The banqueting side of an event is most important as it is often the food quality and quantity that delegates will remember about an event or venue. This is an important time during the event for informality and attendees being able to network and mingle with other attendees and the company hosting the event.

It is important to liaise with the banqueting manager at the venue in the early planning stages of the event. This enables him to understand your event objectives and type of audience attending, the lengths of event in order to be able to give advice on menu and services to offer. The catering professional will have an idea of a balanced diet especially if the delegates are on a 24 hour rate and the event continues for several days, and you want to make sure that there is plenty of variety in the food on offer.

When your delegates register you should have a pre-event questionnaire where the guest can advise on any allergies or special dietary requirements, vegetarian, halal only food etc... Knowing your delegates will enable you to discuss which menu options are best for the group.

Depending on your event and the type of package you have gone for – either day delegate rate, 24hour delegate rate if residential, or on an itemized basis – you will have a choice of food and beverages. If your event is a one day conference and people are travelling some distance arrival you may wish to organize coffee and tea with pastries or bacon rolls on arrival and during registration.

You need to consider your programme agenda, where best to fit in the coffee break, and the type of lunch: either a standing fork buffet which is good for networking, sit down buffet or a seated plate service. Each service will give a different ambience and require different length of time to serve. You will have an idea of the time allocated for the lunch breaks during the day's programme. Times for breaks need to be flexible as sometimes sessions can overrun or the programme may be changed. Continuous consultation and working with the venue to produce a running order of the event will give them a good idea of timings for their banqueting staff preparation and service, especially if rooms need to have their set up turned around in particular breaks.

Booking the right function room for meals and refreshments

- You may decide to have a private lunch for your group and if this important you will need to make sure that the room size will fit the type of meal you are intending to have. Seated buffet will require a larger room than standing buffet. For a standing buffet they will need at least 0.8 sq metres per delegate while for seated plated food they will need 1 sq metre per delegate. Make sure that there are plenty of service stations for the number of guests attending to prevent long queues forming.*
- If it is an evening dinner make sure that there is enough room for the cabaret entertainer, dance floor, after dinner speaker, or moveable bar as necessary.*
- Check the table capacities. This is important when you are creating seating plans as some banqueting tables can be laid out for 8, 10 or 12 seated guests.*
- Check what the function rooms are being used for on either side of your room as a loud disco could ruin a speech.*
- If using an outside terrace for pre-dinner drinks have a backup plan for inclement weather.*

Drinks

It is usually recommended not to serve alcohol during lunch as some delegates might find it difficult to concentrate in the afternoon in the graveyard slot. Quite often a cocktail reception along with soft drinks is used both at the finish of a day conference before leaving, and after a break as pre-dinner drinks for those events with 24 hour delegates. Decide on

how much drink you are going to offer per delegate. This may be on a drinks package option on a consumption basis. If it is a cocktail drink then normally 2 glasses of wine per delegates or equivalent in soft drinks or small bottles of beer is fine for a half an hour drinks reception. Agree with the banqueting manager to let you know if the capacity of drinks ordered is getting near to the end so that you as the event organiser have the option to increase the amount if need be. It is also best to make sure when you are dealing with the venue that the bar staff know that you or a designated person are the only ones authorised to alter or increase the allocation of food and beverage agreed on the contract. This is to stop anyone else in the company deciding to order more alcohol and suddenly finding the extra charges on the main account.

At dinner the normal rule of thumb is half bottle per person with water available at the table. Also establish whether you are going to leave the bottles on the table or have a waiter serve, usually the latter serves less alcohol. As a general rule more white wine than red is drunk at gala dinners usually in a ratio of 3:1. Ask to be able to see the empty bottles used at the end of the evening before signing the drinks bill. Always inform the venue as to whether you are going to have digestives served whether these are charged to the main account or whether guests will be paying for these themselves.

For the after dinner bar service, decide if this is going to be a cash bar or open bar. If the latter establish a limit to the spend and have in place an agreed and specific policy for overspend authorisation.

Further articles on how to run a successful business event that has ROI will follow. To receive these valuable ideas and make sure that you do not miss any of the articles [register on our web site](#) and we will deliver them to your inbox free. The articles will be full of tips and ideas, to help you and your business in event management.

Next Tip Sheet: Part 7 – Conference On-site Logistics

Reference reading:

John G Fisher - How to run a Successful Conference