

Tips to Reduce Your AV Costs

Audiovisual production is an important element of almost every meeting. But after taking part in a roundtable discussion recently, I realized just how many questions planners have about this aspect of their meetings. One question that kept coming up was “How do I select an AV company?”

The first step is to identify why this event is being held, who the audience is, and what the tolerance is for any type of snafu.

You might be thinking, well, it needs to be perfect. However, the standard for a company training meeting is probably very different than for a presentation to major clients, or with a celebrity speaker. For example, for some events we use projector doubling, which involves having two projectors focused on the same screen. If one projector fails, the other continues to project the image, and the audience never notices a problem. This increases costs, though, since you are renting two projectors. Do you really need this for an employee training session?

Next, how complicated is the presentation? Is it a basic Power Point presentation in a breakout session? Or will it involve switching between video and computer inputs? Will it involve one presenter or several? Will you receive their visuals in advance or on-site? Will each person want to use his or her own laptop? If presenters are using their own laptops, will they be Macs or a PCs?

Different Macs take different cables, much as each cell phone has its own charger cable. Be sure to instruct any presenter using a Mac to bring the cable as well.

It is also important to know how technically savvy your presenters are. Will you need an AV technician in every breakout room or could that person support multiple rooms? Another consideration is the meeting space itself. Will the room be set once or will it be broken down and reset the next day? The cost of labor to set and break a room can be more than the cost of renting the equipment. Don't make the mistake of just looking at equipment rental prices.

Now that you've answered these questions, here are some options for handling the audio visual component of your program.

Option 1 is using the in-house AV Company. This is often the easiest option, and it offers some real advantages. When you are conducting your site inspection, you can ask to have a rep from the AV company join you. These folks have done numerous programs at this property so they know the space. On site you can pick up the house phone and ask for the AV company, and you're connected.

In-house companies will know the quirks of their property. Many hotels have rooms that are challenging to use. I recently had a program in a “meeting room” that had been a night club. The ceiling was low and there were six large columns in the room. In situations like this, the in-house company sometimes has an advantage—they know exactly where to put the equipment to maximize the room. This is especially important if you will not be able to conduct a site inspection in advance.

What is the downside? In many cases the in-house company is more expensive. The hotel often takes a percentage of the AV company's fee. That alone can be enough to increase the cost. However, you

may be able to negotiate the fee down, especially if you remind the company that its equipment may well just sit there if you don't use it.

Option 2 is to use an outside or third party AV Company. In this option you determine what your AV requirements are, develop a RFP, and put it out to bid. I always include the in-house AV company in this process. Be aware that many hotel contracts contain language limiting your ability to bring in an outside company. Negotiate this clause out before you sign the contract or you will be bound by its terms.

It is important to spell out clearly in your RFP the type of equipment you require, so you can make valid technical comparisons. For instance, either specify the number of lumens required OR ask the AV companies that bid to indicate what they recommend. Lumens indicate projector brightness. In a boardroom, a projector with 1,200 lumens would be sufficient. However, a presentation in a ballroom would require a projector with 5,000-7,000 lumens. It is important to compare "apples to apples" when reviewing bids.

Make sure you understand how you will be billed for labor. Is it an hourly rate, a percentage of the cost, or a set charge per room? If a room needs to be broken down and then re-set, will you be paying an additional labor charge to do so?

Using an outside company may trigger some additional costs, such as travel expenses for the crew, hotel rooms and per diems, truck rental and parking fees. The hotel may also charge a patch fee to use the hotel sound system if you don't use the in-house company.

The advantage in using an outside audiovisual company is that it allows you to develop a relationship with an audiovisual company. They learn about your program and presenters. You develop a level of trust. A disadvantage is that it takes more time to evaluate multiple bids.

If you choose a third party AV company, they may require space to store their equipment at the meeting venue. This can be more of an issue with larger meetings.

Option 3 is to own your own AV equipment. Companies that produce a large number of meetings sometime go this route. The challenge here is to ensure that the equipment is show-ready and that there is competent technical support available on site. If you are considering this option, ask yourself, "What will you do if you have an equipment problem?" If you have technical staff to support the meeting on-site, this might be a good cost saving option. Make sure that back-up AV equipment is available and that sufficient shipping time is allowed.

As you decide which option is best for your program, keep in mind that no one will thank you for saving money if your attendees can't see and hear the presentation. That is why they are coming in the first place.

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