



Top 20 Cost-Cutting Tips

Creative ways to save on venues, F&B, activities and more

by Michael C. Lowe
December 1, 2010

Getting more for less has become the norm when it comes to planning and executing meetings and events. But being frugal doesn't have to mean looking cheap. Here are a number of smart and creative cost-saving strategies that will prove pleasing to attendees -- and procurement.

1. Hold the hard stuff. Keeping a fully stocked bar open for the duration of an event can lead to a pricey tab. Tony Napoli, president of New York City-based destination management company Briggs Inc., suggests limiting cocktail hour to the period before meals or doing away with hard liquor altogether. "Most people are happy with wine, beer and soda," says Napoli, "and some venues have decent house wines for a fraction of the price."

2. BYOB. Groups can forgo the bar tab completely and save money by supplying their own alcohol. "Bringing your own liquor and working out a reasonable corkage fee can cost less than the expensive rates hotels and venues offer for the same quality drinks," says Serene Yeo, vice president of marketing and sales development with Merrill Lynch Wealth Management in Singapore.

3. Be frugal with food. Note that morning programs will include just coffee and beverages, and advise attendees to take care of their own meals. Start sessions after breakfast, and schedule a lunch break.

4. Add value for free. Simple things like having the waitstaff line up at the door when guests arrive or asking the chef to come out and say a few words during the meal look impressive but cost nothing.

5. Reuse the same venue. Contracting meeting or event space for multiple dates allows planners to negotiate a break on rental fees. Jeff O'Hara, president of PRA Destination Management--New Orleans, brought three different clients to one venue on three different dates. By planning ahead and booking all three events at once, he saved around 20 percent total. This strategy also can work with A/V services, food and beverage, and transportation.

In another situation, O'Hara booked the Superdome in New Orleans for back-to-back nights, saving \$9,000 for each client by avoiding the \$18,000 fee to lay down and pick up the field during the off-season.

6. Skip the tux. Guests dressed for a black-tie event usually expect finer cuisine than those clad in cocktail attire or business-casual dress. "You can go even further and incorporate a

casual theme," suggests Emilie Flynn, manager of meetings and conventions with the Professional Bail Agents of the United States in Washington, D.C. "Themes based on the beach or the American West keep the atmosphere festive but dressed down."

7. Enlist volunteers. Asking local hospitality industry students to volunteer or work for reduced wages in exchange for experience can help save money and fill in the gaps between staff members. Jeff O'Hara has placed students in greeter and direction-giver positions.

8. Look local. Hiring on-site staff who live close to the venue decreases transportation costs and creates freelance relationships.

9. Say goodbye to bottles. Planners can save green and be green by asking hotels to serve tap water or offer water stations in place of bottled water at all functions and meals unless otherwise requested. "Going from plastic bottles to free water stations can save an organization thousands of dollars," says Emilie Flynn, "And attendees appreciate the environmentally friendly effort."

10. Double duty on centerpieces. Integrate décor into an organization's corporate responsibility program by donating event centerpieces. Tony Napoli suggests sending floral arrangements to a hospital or senior group. Or, opt for potted plants or dried florals, for longer-lasting giveaways.

11. Reroute the commission. When booking a hotel without using a third-party agent, ask for a 10 percent commission on room nights picked up by the group. The extra cash can be used for additional event supplies or against the master bill, says Merry Marwig, membership and event administrator for the Schaumburg, Ill.-based global trade association Hotel Technology Next Generation, who has had a 100 percent success rate in all three of her attempts. Marwig has saved her organization \$4,467 using this tip.

12. Put on your own show. Ask attendees to donate their talents during events. "Every large organization has talented musicians and performers who would enjoy playing for their peers for free," says Winston Welch, executive director of the World History Association in Honolulu. "It doesn't have to be a big setup, either. Music during something as simple as registration soothes nerves and adds class."

13. Let speakers sell. Allow speakers to sell their books, videos or other products at the event in exchange for a price break. The speaker can tactfully alert attendees where he will be set up and which of his products he will be selling, says Brad Goodsell, president of Executive Travel Directors in Chicago. How the speaker is allowed to promote his or her own products should be agreed on ahead of time, so that meeting content isn't compromised.

14. Offer a service. Ask lower-profile speakers for a discount in exchange for providing them with a high-quality video recording of the presentation that they can use for future marketing purposes. Brad Goodsell notes that while this move can save money while helping the presenter, some companies may be leery of having their logo attached to a speaker's marketing materials; if this is an issue, planners might want to arrange for their company logos and related paraphernalia to be out of the shot in advance.

15. Salvage breakfast leftovers. Nonperishable items from a continental breakfast -- breads, pastry, snack bars -- can be set on fresh trays and served again during the first morning break, suggests Linwood Campbell, director of catering at The Westin Charlotte (N.C.).

16. Save on soft-dollar items. Add value to room stays by negotiating for free newspapers, in-room water bottles, welcome amenities, bathrobes and slippers. They may be small nuances, says Scott Ramsdell, events director for The Research Board Inc., in New York City, but for guests staying at mid-tier hotels, it's nice to add some extra bells and whistles into the contract.

17. Limit the bubbly. For a toast, especially during a meal, consider filling champagne flutes halfway, as any more is likely to go to waste. In addition, using Prosecco instead of champagne could save even more money.

18. Ration meals. Using plating techniques such as bento boxes will allow for smaller portions without looking cheap, says Scott Berglund, director of meetings and special events at The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island (Fla.).

19. Go to the source. Buying supplies such as goody bags, paper or writing materials in bulk from wholesale stores is a good idea, but for the real discounts, planners should negotiate directly with distributors and manufacturers. "You may have to buy your goods in large quantities, but over one or two years, it will save thousands of dollars," says Tania Dougherty, CMP, founder of the Little Wine Bus, based in New York City. The process can take time, Dougherty notes, so it helps to work this angle far in advance of an event.

20. Ask for freebies. As the familiar proverb goes, if you don't ask, you don't get. Marney Andersen, senior manager with Meeting Technology and Data Management in Rochelle Park, N.J., suggests asking venues about complimentary power strips, flip charts and easels; such items normally might incur only small fees, but those can add up. "Additionally, most properties are willing to upgrade a limited number of rooms to a higher class at the group rate," says Andersen, "and they might even throw in complimentary amenities for your VIPs -- but only if you ask."