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## Entertainment Event Planning Guide

Event planning for entertainment should be fairly simple. Yet time after time, we see great entertainment somewhat diminished as a result of bad planning. Following are some simple tips to help you maximise your entertainment dollar with simple advanced planning.

### Incorporating entertainment into your event

Some general principles for incorporating entertainment into any event should be fairly obvious:

- The entertainment needs to be seen (lighting, staging etc.)
- The entertainment needs to be heard (sound, PA systems etc.)
- Ideally, the entertainment should not be scheduled to clash with dancing (loud music), speeches or over other activities (like eating).

All events (yes, even kids' birthday parties!) should have a rudimentary plan. At the very least, jot down a sequence of events with related timings. Specific examples will be given in the relevant sections below, but even a minimal plan can help to guide your function to be a success. At the very least, your plan should include:

- Guests arrival time (allow at least 30 minutes between this time and the official function start to allow people to get there and settle in).
- Official event start time
- The start time for any specific speeches or events (such as cutting the birthday cake etc.) with timings for each event.
- If you are feeding your guests, a time when the servings starts and ends.
- The main entertainment starting time and duration.
- The end time of the function.

It's also a good idea to build in contingency time. This is some extra time that you have built into the event to allow for some common problems and hold-ups, such as the food preparation being late, or speeches running overtime. You should inform everyone who is WORKING at the function (chefs, entertainers, wait staff, musicians etc.) that this time may be needed, so they can plan ahead as well.

Now of course, plans are just that—plans. And because humans are involved, even the best planned events can go awry because someone speaks too long, or the dinner is late being served, or guest of honour gets stuck in traffic! However, having a plan to start with means you simply have to adjust it to accommodate unforeseen glitches, which is much easier than not having a plan to begin with!

Now, we'll take individual events and look at them in more detail.

## **Children's parties**

Children's parties are easier than most functions because at least you have some control over the participants. Kids can be told to come and eat NOW, or come and see the magic show NOW, so in many ways children's parties are easier to control than many other types.

Until you're in the middle of one!

You definitely need contingency time in a children's party schedule to deal with the odd scraped knee, temper tantrum or shy child who won't interact. So a typical schedule for a ten-year-old child's party might be:

- Arrival Time: 230pm
- Start games: 3.00pm
- Serve Food: 4.00pm
- Start magic show: 4.30pm
- Cut birthday cake: 5.15pm
- Guests depart: 5.45
- Function ends: 6.00pm

If the child is younger, you would probably cut back both the overall time and the magic show time.

Scheduling the magic show after the food and before the cake is a good idea. The kids will be occupied at the food table before the show (giving the magician time to set up in relative privacy) and have somewhere specific to be after the show.

For successful children's parties, it's important to do their thinking for them and direct them from one activity to another, so they are never standing around with nothing to do. Some time can be taken up by sending them out to the back yard for supervised free play, or if it's a pool party, to give them some (heavily supervised) time in the pool. Or perhaps give them some time with electronic games in the family room.

However you structure your children's party, the key is to keep moving through your pre-planned agenda so the kids are never just standing around with nothing to do.. This can lead to boredom for the kids and consequent trouble as they try to ferret out something interesting to do!

If you are booking a clown or magician, they will need somewhere private to set up their props and change into costumes etc. Most of us don't mind if we have to change in the bathroom and set up in the performance area, but it does make it very difficult to set up the show with the kids milling about. So either designate a private room (bedroom, office et.) for the show to be set up in, or keep the kids out of the performing area prior to the show.

## **Adult parties, cocktail functions and similar events**

Adult parties (or "gatherings" as they are now called by young adults) often have no set format or agenda other than a get-together for drink, perhaps food and lots of chat and horseplay!

Generally food (if it served at all) is in the form of canapés or finger food that is either served by wait-staff or left on a buffet table for guests to pick through themselves.

Planning entertainment for these affairs depends on the type of entertainment you have in mind. The easiest entertainment to incorporate is Roving Entertainment, where the magician (or mind reader, Tarot Reader, musician, comedian or clown) approaches individual groups and performs just for them. People tend to form groups at these types of functions and roving entertainers will therefore give each group its own private “mini show” then move on to another group.

In practice, of course, people from other groups may gather round the entertainer to see what’s going on, but as long as the venue is large enough to permit groups to be scattered enough so they’re not all watching one group’s performance, this is an ideal, casual form of entertainment for these functions.

To plan for this, you need to have a time in mind for the entertainment to start and end. As a rule of thumb, you’ll need about an hour of roving entertainment per 100 guests. (This can vary quite a lot, depending on the size of the groups and how scattered they are throughout the venue, but it’s a good start).

This will mean the entertainer spends about six minutes with each group (assuming groups are between 8-10 people). If you want longer individual shows, you’ll need to book the entertainer for longer.

If there are formal parts to the party (speeches, karaoke etc.) try to schedule the roving entertainment so it doesn’t clash with these events. Not only will it be harder for the entertainer and distracting for your guests, you may not get the full benefit of the entertainment you’re paying for!

If you want the entertainer to perform for all guests at once, you’ll need to plan for a floor show of some description, albeit in a simple way. Firstly, make sure the performer has somewhere to change and set up away from the guests. In a private home, this can be a spare bedroom or office. At a function centre or hall, it may have to be a different ante-room. All us magicians have done it, but we prefer not to set the act in a bathroom or kitchen!

Plan to have the floor show at a time that doesn’t clash with anything else. Get someone to attract your guest’s attention, make an announcement and muster them towards the performing area. Once the show is over, your guests will start to disperse and mingle. A good time for formal speeches or other more formal parts of the evening is right after the show.

## **Seated dinners (Weddings, 21sts, Barmitzvas etc.)**

For formal seated dinners, lunches or breakfasts, you have a choice between table entertainment (e.g. close up magic performed at each table), a floor or stage show performed for all your guests at once, or a combination of the two.

The guidelines for close up entertainment at individual tables are similar to those for cocktail functions (see above). If you play background music during the function, try to make sure it’s not

too loud. This inhibits people from talking to each other and can interfere with the table entertainer's presentation.

The best times to schedule table entertainment is while people are first seated and awaiting their meals, in between the main meal and dessert, or dessert and coffee, or after the meal is completed. When people are actually eating, they like to eat and talk, not be distracted by tableside entertainment.

If there is a formal part of the evening (with speeches or presentations) try to make sure the table-side entertainment is finished by then. If you have 200 people in a function hall and only 1 hour in which to squeeze the table entertainment, recognise this means that each table will only get about 3 minutes (not long at all).

If you find that one table-side entertainer cannot get to all your guests within the appointed time, you may need two, who will then split the room and work half each. In the example of 200 guests and only an hour in which to have the table entertainment, you would then be able to give each table 6 minutes (assuming tables comprise 8-10 people). This means that each entertainer would work for the full hour and be able to get through about 10-12 tables in that time.

You don't need to plan excessively for this style of entertainment. The performer will generally arrive between 1 hour and 30 minutes before they are due to start performing, will need virtually no set-up area and just somewhere to change. Some won't even need that.

If you need a floor show (performed on the dance floor on the same level as the audience) or a stage show (usually performed on a raised stage area) then you do need to plan for it a bit more. You must make sure the performer will be seen (lighting, staging and viewing angles from the tables), heard (PA system, microphone, music system etc.) and that the performance will fit organically into the overall function.

The best time to schedule a larger show into an event is in between the meal and speeches or dancing, or just after the speeches, but before the band or the dancing starts. Some organisers will slot the floor show in between the band's sets and this can work well too.

Try not to schedule the show while people are eating unless the venue is specifically designed for that purpose. In dinner theatres or some restaurants with cabaret, the seating is arranged to allow patrons to eat and watch the show, in which case it's fine.

However most contemporary banquet layouts will have many chairs turned with their back to the stage and running a show while people have to be facing the table (and potentially away from the stage) makes it very awkward for them.

The need for a stage per se is dependent on the number of people, the size of the hall or room and the nature of the performance. After a certain distance, people at the back will not be able to see the floor because they will need to gaze over the heads of those in front of them. If the distance is great, you may find that people at the back can only see things above chest or even shoulder height at the front. When you are in this situation, you will need a stage raised at least a foot (and generally more) off the floor.

If the venue and audience number is large enough to need a raised stage, you will probably need stage lighting also. This doesn't have to be elaborate—floodlights from the hardware will do, just as long as the stage area is sufficiently illuminated for people at the back of the room to see properly.

If possible, at show time, the general lights in the room should be dimmed slightly to focus attention on the brightly lit stage area. The general lights should not be switched off as they would be in a theatre, because people may still need to move around, see what's on their table etc. but dimming the general lights to focus attention where it should be is a good idea.

A floor or stage show may also require some extensive set up before the performance time. Illusionists (magicians doing large stage illusions with people and large animals) will probably need the most extensive set up and this cannot be done while your guests are in the room.

So for most floor or stage shows you will need to allow for venue access long before the function proper starts. If you have a show with several performers, you may need to establish a "green room" area for them to prepare and relax out of sight of your guests both before and after their performance. As they can often not bump out their equipment before your guests have left (it looks terrible, having shows dismantled while your guests are still dancing or eating!) you will need an area for the performers to be while they wait to bump out after their show(s). This will also apply to bands.

What all this means is that if you are hiring the venue, you may have to hire it for up to two or three hours (or longer, depending on the acts) before and after your actual function times. Be sure to check with your entertainers and other suppliers (caterers, wait staff etc.) what their requirements are.

## **Business events & corporate functions**

There are a variety of business events that can use entertainment such as staff meetings, working groups, conferences, conventions and trade shows. The latter are a special kind of event, so we'll deal with those later (below). Apart from trade shows though, the main thrust of any business event is to bring people together and make them feel good about being there, whether that be staff, clients, suppliers, management or any other business sub-group.

The guidelines for business events are mostly the same as for private functions, except there is usually less flexibility in timing and content than with non-commercial versions.

You may want the entertainment to build your products or your company messages into their act. If so, this will need consultation well ahead of time, to give the act a chance to consider and recommend their approach to this.

With magic, inclusion of company products or messages can be quite simple by metaphorically drawing parallels between what is happening onstage with company values or service standards. Or it can be very complex with custom-built tricks and illusions that make use of the company logos or actual products such as a custom-built illusion to produce a car company's new model out of thin air.

It is also a good idea to brief the entertainment on the day, pointing out any company etiquette that must be observed, certain clients perhaps or anything else the performer might need to know in order to not offend or put off your company's clients or market positioning.

There are so many types of business events, it will be pointless to attempt a universal plan. However, it is important to stick to the basics of event planning and not have the entertainment working while anything else is going on and to sequence the activities as best you can for the entire event.

## **Trade Shows**

Trade shows are a unique aspect of corporate entertainment because entertainment at these shows has one specific goal: to draw in potential clients and then make their excursion into that company's world memorable.

It's important to note that it is beyond the scope of trade show entertainment to actually make the sales and establish contacts that are so vital to a company's trade show ROI. That job is still up to your salespeople—all the entertainment will do is deliver bums on seats (or more usually standing!).

Trade show entertainment can range from huge spectacular (and expensive!) theatrical productions (for the launch of a new key product) to quite simple affairs where the entertainment literally happens outside your company's booth or stand to attract people to that stand and perhaps deliver some key messages about your company.

Generally the booth-based entertainment works in cycles during each day of the trade show. That means, perhaps a 15-minute act to draw the spectators, then a half-hour break to allow your salespeople to process that crowd before repeating the act and getting a whole new crowd.

The shows need to be timed to accommodate the sales process. If the salespeople will take up to half an hour to talk to interested people initially attracted by the entertainment, there's no point starting another show if there's no-one in sales available to follow up when the show's finished.

Your sales team should be ready as the show begins. As they observe people in the crowd, they can gauge the interest and as soon as there's an appropriate gap in the show, or the show finishes, they should pounce on the people watching the show and follow up on what they've just seen.

Trade shows are a numbers game. For every 100 people who pass your booth, maybe five will want to discuss your product (depending on how well targeted your product is to the trade show's market) and of them, you may make one sale. With the costs of trade show attendance as they are, you have to get an awful lot of people into your display to make the trade show appearance worthwhile.

Your trade show entertainer should know this. His or her express goal is to attract people to the booth and we all know many techniques for nabbing even just passers-by to make them part of the engaged audience, so just let us do our job for you. This is magic at its most commercial—it's merely being used as a beacon to attract potential customers from a sea of potentials—there's no room for theatrical artistry here, you need someone who understands business and cut-through.

Another aspect of trade shows are what they call in America "hospitality suites". These are spaces within the general trade show area, but away from the bustle of the trade show itself where you can invite VIPs and large potential clients to take a more detailed and relaxed approach to introducing your company and its products.

Having entertainment in the suites can make a potential customer's memory of your event that much stronger, because with a wise entertainer in charge, it can seem that the show is being done just for one person. This magic tends to be close up magic and can afford to be a lot more relaxed and reflective than on the trade show floor. Here, you need a host (or hostess) type who can take someone into their confidence and show them something miraculous.

Generally, there are no set shows in the suites, but a series of encounters and intimate magic done very succinctly, often for an audience of only 3 or 4 people. Your staff should feel free to call the entertainer over to perform for the client you're seeing at the moment and therefore, you hire the entertainer by the hour, not by the show.

## **Need more help?**

Be sure to download our Event Planner form at [www.justaddmagic.com.au/events.html](http://www.justaddmagic.com.au/events.html)

We're happy to help with any aspect of entertainment planning for your specific events. Contact [adam@justaddmagic.com.au](mailto:adam@justaddmagic.com.au) or check our website at [www.justaddmagic.com.au](http://www.justaddmagic.com.au) for more details on how to "Just Add Magic" to your functions and events.

Best Wishes with your event planning,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Milgate". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Adam" being more prominent than the last name "Milgate".

Adam Milgate,  
Managing Director