



• Professional Arts and Artist Support •

Planning a Public Relations Event

Regardless of whether your event is strictly formal or an unstructured casual affair -- it will require planning, coordination and behind-the-scenes organisation to be a success. The steps for organising a successful occasion are universal and these same basic principles can be adapted for any event and any level of event experience.

First, gather all your information. Armed with this, you can break down the function into categories. Use index dividers in a ring binder – the tabs should be broad enough for labelling and you'll need at least ten dividers. Later on, depending on the scale of function, you may expand your file into individual folders -- but in the early planning stages it's easier to have everything in one place.

Begin by organising a Contacts Sheet (example attached) that will always be in the front of the binder. This will save you time and permit you to add information as you progress.

Next use a Checklist (example attached) to prompt your imagination. The Checklist is the best starting point to identify the type of party you want; it will focus your thoughts and also help you to discern what you do not want. Use the Checklist when discussing the event with others, so everyone will remain focused to keep your planning efficient.

Under each of the headings, I will offer prompts and questions you should ask yourself. I have included additional headings which you may want to consider.

Financial considerations will inevitably influence your decisions, but the starting point in planning an event should always be envisioning and recording your ideal scenario.

Purpose of Event: The requirements of the function will vary according to whether your launch is for a new venture, which could be a business or a creative work, or whether it's a new product line under the umbrella of an existing company.

Guests: Whom do you wish to invite?

Number of guests: Can each guest bring a companion, or is it limited to those specifically invited by name? Bear in mind that a less expensive, but more inclusive, function can often produce a more successful event. This especially applies to functions in a business where people work in a collaborative way. It's a good idea to keep back a few invitations: as the date draws near there will be people you meet whom you may wish to invite. There is no hard and fast rule that will tell you the percentage of people who will turn up to your function; for instance, the social season will certainly influence the decision of whether or not to attend. Pick dates that do not have known conflicts for the people you wish to invite.

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Style: Formal? Informal? Theme? As you come? Invitees need to know and feel comfortable in that knowledge. If you are planning an early evening gathering, or cocktail party, you can cater for those guests arriving after a day's work by suggesting that dress should include "a dash of red", or whatever effect will achieve a unifying "dress code."

Venue: Space is a consideration. Being unable to move comfortably will adversely affect any event. Promotional events, especially, will be more successful if guests can circulate freely. You should keep seating to a minimum at events that would benefit from guests mingling, however, only you know your client base and you must weigh their needs against the purpose of the function.

Food: Finger buffet? Formal dinner? Nibbles? The time of day will dictate much; people arriving at a mealtime may not have eaten, so you should plan accordingly or be very clear on the invitation.

Drinks: Free? Cash bar? Limited number of free drinks then a pay bar? How will the free drink be dispensed – consider a tear-off portion on the invitation or, at less formal events, offer everyone a paper slip ('drink token') on arrival.

Music: Live, DJ or completely pre-recorded? Consider the mood you wish to create: live music can enhance your event and this does not necessarily mean a band; one pianist or harpist can create the right atmosphere. However many musicians you engage, you must think about where they will be situated in your floor plan. And remember set-up time – always allow longer than you anticipate. Most musicians need a break in the evening so it's important to ensure that you or the musicians provide back up recorded music for the break period.

Furniture and décor: Depending on the style of your function and the activities you have planned, you may need: tables and chairs, tablecloths, flowers, decorations (the latter if themed or if the room needs 'help'). Lots can be achieved in a plain, functional room using 'props' and some low lighting.

Budget: This is an important topic. A small amount of money can go a long way – and the more you can do with "insiders" and volunteer help, the less money you will need to hire things in. Caterers will nearly always want to quote "per head" which is not necessarily the most cost effective for this sort of function. Be sure to get a "per head" and a "per-tray" quote (for appetizer functions).

Planning: Your lead time will dictate the schedule. For instance, an informal party next week will require you to set different priorities than would a more lavish function in six month's time.

You can prepare a planning schedule to indicate where your priorities are and at what point you need to consider each aspect of the event. Begin by printing off a week-by-week calendar from now until the event date and then work backwards from the event, filling in the tasks that need to be accomplished by a certain date. Be sure to allow some flexibility and some "slow" time, so when one item on your list gets delayed, it doesn't throw your entire schedule into a tailspin. Be gentle with yourself -- build in some recovery time. The venue, caterers and musicians should be identified and secured as early as possible - good people in each of these categories get booked up quickly.

Time gives you the luxury of finding the most economic solution. It is always valuable to get two or three quotes on each of the expensive components. Suppliers should offer generous prices for a booking made well in advance, though bear in mind that many will require a deposit, especially if you are a first-time client.

Suppliers: There might be in-house suppliers whom protocol demands you give first opportunity to provide the needed services. Be honest if you feel they are not going to be able to give you what you want, and be sure you can outline why.

Staffing: Depending upon the venue, staff may already be in place or at least readily available for hire. You need to 'walk through' the event in your head and note each point that requires staffing - from the initial empty room to the final clean up. If the event is to be held in an office, remember that there might be lingering odours the next day, especially if smoking is permitted, and plan accordingly.

Security: You may have requirements that are different from the security provided by the venue. For instance, VIP's may require that you provide special security.

Licences and Permissions: Some places demand a liquor, entertainment, or live music licence. You should find out if this is a requirement and ensure that the necessary applications are made and approved well in advance of the event.

Agreements: You should draw up a simple letter of agreement, both for your own security and the supplier, most of whom will require some kind of contract.

Other Considerations:

- Transport: how will guests reach the venue?
- Will you need valet service?
- Is adequate parking available?
- Will you need to arrange for transportation home for any guests who may indulge too much to drive themselves?
- Neighbours: do you need to write a letter to immediate neighbours telling them of the event and the possibility of them being disturbed by live music?
- Smoking or non-smoking event: you need to decide and ensure that you check any rules that the venue might have in place. Do you need to segment one area for smoking guests to partake?
- Will the exterior need special lighting?
- If it's cool weather, will you need to check overcoats?
- Will you need someone to help with special needs guests?
- Who will handle breakdown and cleanup after the event? Don't underestimate the time this will take, especially if those concerned are unfamiliar with the venue.

Only you know your guest list, your event type, and how you need to plan. Imagine all the possible scenarios and try to plan for them. Have enough assistance on hand and you won't be phased by the unexpected.

CONTACTS

Function:

Date:

Venue:

Contact name:

Tel:

Fax:

email:

Caterer:

Contact Name:

Tel:

Fax:

email:

Musicians:

Contact Name:

Tel:

Fax:

email:

Other Suppliers:

Contact Name:

Tel:

Fax:

email:

Other:

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CHECKLIST

- Purpose: [Book launch, product or business launch, film premiere or theatre opening night]
- Guests: [Who should be invited and why?]
- Number:
- Style:
- Venue:
- Food:
- Drinks:
- Music:
- Furniture:
- Décor:
- Budget:
- Staffing:
- Security:
- Licences & Permissions:
- Agreements:
- Other [e.g. transport, parking, cleaning etc]:
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