

15 Money-Saving Tips for Meeting Planning

A Guide to Frugal Planning for Meeting Professionals

*Tips for saving on your event budget from Amita Patel, CHSP, Director of Marketing,
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In these challenging times, it's no secret that companies are pinching pennies wherever they can. Web conferences, social networks and other high-tech meeting tools have their place, but there are times (and reasons) when there's just no substitute for getting people together.

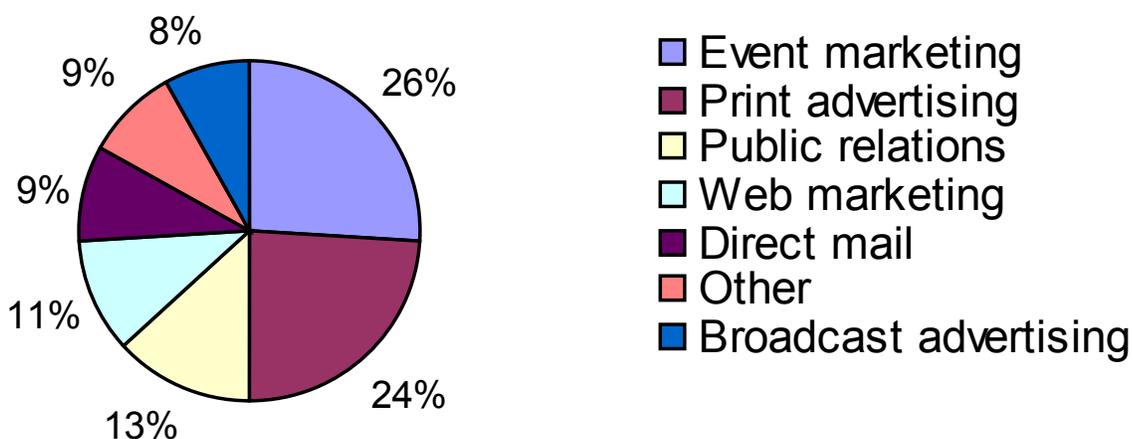
Putting aside the lavish retreats for high-flying bank executives that caused such an outrage, meetings are, in fact, good for the economy. Meetings, events and performance incentive travel in the United States are responsible for almost 15% of all domestic travel. They generate about 7.7¹ million jobs and \$194.1 billion in wages annually, according to the United States Travel Association.

"Give many high-end white-collar workers a 3G iPhone or BlackBerry and they can pretty much do their entire job from anywhere in the world. But in the end, business is all about trust, and that still requires face-to-face encounters," Robert E. Lang and Mark Munro, fellows at The Brookings Institution, a public policy think-tank in Washington D.C., wrote in "What Happens in Vegas ... Stimulates The Economy," an op-ed article in the Las Vegas Sun².

The keys to convincing management that meetings and events should remain an integral part of any company or organization's overall strategy are to demonstrate that every possible cost-saving measure is taken into account, and, in the end, to demonstrate any proposed event's ROI (return on investment).

With that backdrop in mind, I've gathered tips from experts and trade publications, as well as my own insights for reducing costs in several key areas of meeting and event planning.

Marketing Allocations



Source: EventView 2009 Market Report by the MPI Foundation, Event Marketing Institute, George P. Johnson Event Marketing.

Some of the most common areas where meeting planners can save money without cutting quality are:

- 1. Choose your location wisely**
- 2. Create a budget**
- 3. Be flexible**
- 4. (Almost) Everything is negotiable**
- 5. Champagne events on a beer budget**
- 6. Star power on a budget**
- 7. Registration goes online**
- 8. Getting A.V. costs in focus**
- 9. Barter – Can you trade for it?**
- 10. Use more volunteers**
- 11. Design on a dime (décor)**
- 12. Use electronic handouts**
- 13. Can you absolutely, positively get it there for less?**
- 14. Setup & installation costs**
- 15. The ROI of event planning**

1. Choose your location wisely

“Location, location, location” is the oft-quoted mantra of the real estate industry. The phrase is generally used to note that the more desirable a location, the more money people are likely to be willing to pay for it.

It’s true in event planning, too. Where you choose to host an event can have a huge impact on the cost of holding the event. In big cities, it’s not just the basic cost of the venue that are affected, either. Choose a place like New York City or Las Vegas, and you can expect to pay top-of-the-market rates for hotel rooms, food and beverage, and even the hundreds of small must-have items and services that go into pulling off a high-quality event.

Proximity to airports and plenty of hotel rooms and local attractions are all important, of course. But look around, and you may discover you can have access to all those amenities for a fraction of the cost of being in the city center. Larger metropolitan areas frequently have satellite airports and world-class facilities not far from their central locations.

Take The Ontario Convention Center, for example. Located less than an hour from central Los Angeles and many of the attractions Southern California has to offer, the 225,000-square-foot facility is scant minutes away from an easily-accessible international airport and thousands of hotel rooms, many of them built within the past couple of years.

Ontario as a destination provides real value: airline fares, rental cars, meal expenses and more are less expensive by 10% to 20% than other Southern California destinations.

Non-union venues typically have lower labor costs with fewer minimum requirements but building costs at those facilities may be higher. Conversely union facilities may have lower building costs.

It's a good idea to know the union rules and policies at every facility you consider and how those rules affect your costs. Must exhibitors use union labor to set up their booths, for example? Knowing and communicating those rules to your exhibitors can save them money as well.

2. Create and manage a budget

It's a business maxim that in order to control costs, you must know what your costs are.

Even a small event can be a complex undertaking with lots of expense items that can quickly get out of hand if you don't have a plan for dealing with them up front. Identifying costs long before you're actually on site can go a long way toward ensuring that everything is covered before it becomes a last-minute, "gotta have it at any cost" budget-buster. The larger the event, the more important it is to have a detailed budget. There are always those last-minute, unexpected items, and every budget needs some flexibility to deal with them. It's a good idea to have a small percentage built in to handle any unforeseen contingencies, especially with large, difficult-to-quantify costs.

Appendix A includes a detailed breakdown of most of the cost items every meeting planner should take into account when creating an event budget.

3. Be flexible

A great way to save on basic facility costs is to be flexible about the dates for your event. Date flexibility can score major savings.

Most meeting and convention facilities charge by the hour, so set an agenda, and stick to it; getting in and out on time and planning a tight schedule of events with no more unused time blocks than necessary can save money. Carefully defined operating hours will also save you money.

Ask for help creating an event to fit your budget. You would be surprised how creative and accommodating a venue will be if you provide a realistic budget up front. But understand that every venue has bottom-line operating costs that must be covered.

4. (Almost) Everything is negotiable

Meeting planners expect a 9% decrease in the number of meetings their organizations will hold in 2009, according to the 2009 FutureWatch survey³ conducted by Meeting Professionals International and American Express. Although that decreased demand will result in fewer service personnel, too, it suggests that suppliers will work harder – and perhaps cut costs – to get your business.

"The overall relationship between planners and suppliers is becoming a buyer's market, where planners can expect to negotiate more generous concessions, incentives, rates, and other contract provisions," MPI said in its survey.

Negotiating with hotels is never easy, but today there are opportunities to leverage everything a meeting planner has to offer, writes Rob Hard, event planning guide at About.com⁴. Hard advocates doing your homework – know what the rates are at competing hotels are before you start negotiating, he suggests. The number of rooms and nights your group will require can be leveraged for discounts. "Guest rooms offer a greater profit margin than any other event service," Hard writes.

5. Champagne events on a beer budget

Food and beverages can make or break a meeting. Experts quoted in industry trade publications spend a great deal of time focusing on how to get the service and quality just right, because it's the item attendees most often comment on.

But it's also one of the areas in which a lot of money can be wasted. Here are some tips from the pros on ways to save money without sacrificing quality.

The majority of convention centers outsource their food and beverage service, and that can make it difficult to negotiate costs. Look for venues that have in-house food and beverage operations. They can often be more flexible in customizing menus to fit an event's budget. At Savor, the Ontario Convention Center's in-house catering service, it's part of the corporate culture to provide flexibility and assistance with menu planning while keeping an eye on your budget. Always ask for help. Convention center and hotel staff understand the need to be frugal and can often offer cost-saving suggestions.

Even here, location is key. Experienced meeting planners know they can judge the overall cost of food and beverage in a particular city just by comparing the cost of a gallon of coffee, writes Elizabeth Pillsworth, CMP, Director of Meetings & Events at Association Resources Inc.

In a recent column, she cited a chart similar to the one below as a rule-of-thumb indicator of relative food and beverage costs:

Cost of a Gallon of Coffee in Selected Cities

New York, NY	\$96.25
Chicago, IL	\$92.00
Boston, MA	\$72.92
San Francisco, CA	\$70.00
San Diego, CA	\$65.00
Las Vegas, NV	\$62.67
Baltimore, MD	\$51.50
Anaheim, CA	\$50.00
Sacramento, CA	\$57.00
Los Angeles, CA	\$48.00
Pasadena, CA	\$47.00
Palm Springs, CA	\$40.00
Ontario, CA	\$40.00

Checking current prices in cities being considered for your event will provide a simple guide.

Since coffee and water make up such a huge part of the food and beverage service, consider these tips: Order coffee by the gallon, not the person, and ask the venue to provide 6-ounce cups versus 8-ounce ones. Likewise, order pastries or cookies by the dozen, and not per person, Pillsworth advises in her article, "In Tough Economic Times ... How to Save on Food and Beverage." Bottled water, too, can be expensive. One enterprising meeting planner ordered cases of water labeled with her organization's logo, and used them in lieu of per-bottle pricing at the venue. A sponsor might cover the cost of this too, in exchange for providing bottled water with the sponsor's logo on the label. Alternatively, water, juices and teas can often be provided by the pitcher for far less than the cost of individual bottles or cans of sodas and other beverages.

Reconsider your mandates. Instead of a sit-down dinner for 600 people, make it a lunch. Or hold a reception with savory appetizers. Either way, you will significantly reduce your costs. Flexibility here can also save you time and staffing costs, which often translates into significant savings.

Desserts served with a meal often go uneaten, so try scheduling desert and coffee service during a break between sessions. Setting up food and beverage tables along the walls instead of in center aisles will reduce consumption, experts say. And monitor when coffee urns are refilled; beverages served scant minutes before a break is scheduled to end will likely go to waste.

6. Star Power on a Budget

Big-name speakers can easily break the budget. So how do you bring in talent that draws attendees on a shoestring?

Look for speakers who don't have to travel far to get to your event, or those who are doing other events nearby at the same time – such as book tours. Negotiating can work, and many speakers are discounting their rates due to the declining number of meetings, but several experts suggest ways to get more value from a speaker to help justify the cost.

Intersection⁵, a blog from The Speakers Bureau, suggests using speakers that bring something extra to the event. For example, it notes that motivational speaker and author Dr. Jackie Freiberg taped a series of video segments that she offered as free follow-ups to her presentation. The organization also suggests using speakers who can contribute in other ways, such as by autographing copies of their books, or writing articles for an organization's newsletter or Web site that can be used to promote or as a follow-up to the event.

Planners might also consider getting a corporate sponsor to foot the bill, or share costs through advertising a speaker's book along with the event, suggests Laura Stack of the National Speakers Association⁶.

7. Registration goes online

Are you still registering attendees with pen and paper?

“Web registration is a ‘killer application,’” writes meeting technology expert Corbin Ball, owner of Corbin Ball Associates. Web registration can save as much as 90% compared with the cost of traditional paper methods. It also typically increases customer service and reliability, according to Ball. There are more than 200 Web-based meeting registration products available and listed at Ball’s Web site, www.corbinball.com/bookmarks. Ball, a certified meeting planner, offers dozens of other ways to save using meeting-related technology in his article for Southern California Meetings + Technology, “40 Ways to Use Technology to Green Your Meetings.”⁷

One of the most well-known web registration applications is Passkey’s RegLink™. RegLink is an API integration technology that can link any online event registration solution to Passkey’s hotel reservation system, allowing meeting planners to integrate hotel reservations directly into their event registration process. The key benefit of RegLink is that it addresses two issues: event registration and guestroom reservations.

With RegLink, more event attendees confirm their hotel rooms within the contracted block, minimizing booking outside the block and attrition exposure, while maximizing pick-up. Visit www.passkey.com for more information.

8. Getting A.V. costs in focus

Audio visual equipment is an area where costs can mount quickly, according to Hard, and renting gear such as LCD projectors can be pretty expensive.

Meetingsnet offers a simple tip for saving on A.V. costs – Don’t arbitrarily place projectors in every room. First, ask speakers whether they’ll be needed.

Should you buy your own gear? There are pros and cons. Compare the cost of a projector with the cost of renting one by the day or the hour, and it seems clear that you’ll save money on buying if you use the equipment a lot. But don’t forget to factor in the costs and potential damage associated with shipping sensitive equipment around the country.

If you chose to buy, you’ll need a good shipping case, which can add a significant chunk to the overall cost (and here’s a potentially costly heads-up based on hard-earned experience: don’t write “LCD projector” on the shipping container.). Remember, too, that it’s your gear; don’t expect to call the venue’s A.V. department when something goes wrong, unless it’s to rent a replacement.

Finally, can you tear down rented A.V. equipment yourself after your event? Many equipment rental firms charge as much for tear-down as they do for set-up, even though tear-down typically takes only half as long, experts advise. But be sure you understand applicable union and venue rules before tackling this one.

9. Barter – Can you trade for it?

Consider trading for all or part of a speaker's fee, advises the National Speakers Association's Stack. Sometimes a few extra days at a resort at or near the venue will work. "Speakers have traded portions of their fee for a PalmPilot, a weekend in Napa, baby formula, boating equipment, and farm tractors! One speaker who spoke at a Mary Kay conference received half of her fee in products," she said in John K. MacKenzie's blog "A Meeting Master's Memo."⁸

Be creative. Consider what else a vendor or sponsor might provide as barter for exhibit space or a program ad, for example.

10. Use more volunteers

When money's tight, the least expensive source of labor available to many membership organizations is volunteers. Though they are a bit harder to manage, and it's a good idea to have backups available for every slot, volunteers will often work in exchange for a free lunch or free admission to an event. Often, they're happy just to have the opportunity to interact with other members of the group.

A few simple management tips can go a long way to help you get the most out of volunteers:

- 1. Make sure volunteers are well-trained. Provide tip sheets or checklists wherever possible.*
- 2. Share your expectations with volunteers, including the objective and desired outcome of the event. The more they understand the targeted objectives and desired results, the better they can accomplish their assigned tasks.*
- 3. Praise volunteers often. Let them know their work is appreciated. If you can find room for it in the budget, a simple thank-you gift can go a long way. If that's not possible, sometimes simply having an emcee thank them for their efforts from the podium at an appropriate event can go a long way.*

11. Design on a dime

Decorating the space where your event takes place is yet another area that can be a real budget buster. Here are a few simple ways to keep those costs down. The first, and perhaps simplest suggestion, is to reuse signage, table draping and other decorating materials.

The next best bet is to find out what's available directly from the venue. "Check out your venue's inventory of tables, chairs, linens, and decorations. Using in-house stock is a lot cheaper than renting," advises Janet R. Pickover, CMP, a director with Site Inspections Plus in Princeton, N.J.⁹

Consider using flowers that are in season, suggests New York-based Shawn Rabideau, owner of Shawn Rabideau Events & Design of New York in "Event Cost Saving Tips from the Pros."¹⁰

12. Use electronic handouts

How much do you spend on printing handouts – copies of presentations, speeches, white papers or other materials for your event? Consider making them available electronically, advises Corbin Ball

of About.com¹¹. Presentation abstracts, speaker profiles and more can be offered online – with the added benefits of links back to the sponsoring organization’s Web site, those of speakers or presenting organizations, and links to additional information and resources.

This is an especially cost-effective way to deal with the lengthy papers or presentations often known as “proceedings” that are generated for technical, medical and other professional conferences. It takes discipline and advanced planning, and often more than a little prodding to get presenters’ materials in early enough to have everything posted in time for your event. A supplemental publication – offered electronically via email or perhaps as a download from your Web site – offers another opportunity to stay in contact with attendees and boost the value of your organization among its members and stakeholders.

13. Can you absolutely, positively get it there for less?

Shipping everything you’ll need early will let you use less expensive forms of shipping, especially with airlines charging more for extra checked baggage these days. That, of course, means planning far enough in advance so that collateral and handouts will be ready early enough to ship.

For those with big, complex exhibits, an even better plan might be to ship from site-to-site, even storing the booth if necessary, rather than incurring the costs of back-and-forth shipping to your home office.

Ryan Schneiderman, Promotions and Events Specialist with Blue Flame 6 in Phoenix, recently told Meetingsnet about a client who shipped a huge display directly from one conference to the site of the next. “They own a booth that encompasses a 40-foot by 50-foot space, so it’s quite large and expensive to ship.” A little homework told Schneiderman the company could save \$10,000 by shipping the booth to the next city where it would be used and storing it until it was needed for the show.¹²

Another quick tip: scheduling delivery and pickup services during normal business hours can save on overtime charges, meeting planners point out.

14. Setup & installation costs

Consider what you can re-use – a good idea to save on costs in many areas, but especially where large setup and tear-down costs may be involved. Can you make an installation do double duty? Hold multiple events scheduled at different times in a tent or staging area that has already been set up?

Limiting the time allowed for setup and tear-down can also save on labor costs, experts advise. And find out whether something you’ve set up can be used by the event that will follow yours, potentially saving on the costs of tearing it down only to have it set back up again in the same place a day or two later.

15. Remember the ROI

Sometimes the hardest part of meeting planning – and preserving your budget – is convincing the bosses that it was all worth it. While this is especially important for large events, it’s even more critical today as every line item in the company budget is being scrutinized for potential savings.

It’s a good idea to calculate the ROI – Return on Investment – for most meetings, say planners and CVB managers. The formula for calculating ROI is simple, says Monica Myhill, CMP, a contributor to

the book Proving the Value of Meetings and Events.¹³ “When expressed as a formula, ROI looks like this: The ROI percentage equals meeting benefits minus meeting costs, divided by meeting costs, times 100,” she’s quoted in “ROI: Was It Worth It,” in *Southern California Meetings + Events*.

Perhaps the simplest answer was found in the result of a survey conducted in early 2009 for The Center for Exhibition Industry Research by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Travel & Tourism Industry Center at the University of South Carolina. The first part of that survey concluded that it is less expensive for companies to make initial face-to-face contact with a customer through an exhibition than without an exhibition lead. The study also found that exhibitions are a more cost-effective way for companies to identify prospects than other methods, according to CEIR. Copies of the study are free to CEIR members, or may be purchased online.¹⁴

There are many factors for determining the ROI of a successful meeting, and they must be tailored to the objectives of a specific event. In the end, the answers are simple: Were attendees satisfied? Did they come away with more knowledge than before? Did sales — or at least the number of likely prospects — increase?

Answer those questions, and do so with a cost-effective, interesting, and fun event, and your event will be a success.

APPENDIX A

Budget Template¹⁵

Income	Budget	Actual	Variance
Registration			
Full-Paying Registrations			
Partial-Paying Registration			
Spouses			
Speakers			
Guests			
Exhibits/Displays			
Exhibitor Personnel			
Sponsorships			
Advertising			
Grants/Contributions			
Merchandise			
Subtotal			

	Budget	Actual	Variance
Expenses			
<i>Food and Beverage</i>			
Food and Beverage Minimums			
Service Charges/Taxes			
Sub fees for special events			
Centerpieces/Décor			
Print (Menu, Program Book, etc.)			
Entertainment			
Linens			
<i>Speakers/Presenters/Entertainers</i>			
Travel (airfare class, out of pocket, per diem, ground transportation, hotel)			
A/V needs (include equipment for rehearsals, speakers lounge)			
Hand Outs/Print Materials			
<i>Facilities</i>			
Meeting Room Rental			
Room Sets/Labor/Risers			
Audio-Visual			
Signage			
Telephone/Fax/Electronic Communications			
Printing			
Lighting/Staging/Labor			
Security			
Cleaning			
Flipcharts/Easels rental			
Electrical Power/Electricians			
Back Up Facilities			
Complimentary Rooms Provision			
Staff Gratuities			
Special License Fees			
<i>Audio-Visual/Equipment</i>			
General Session/Breakout Equipment			
Rehearsals and "Ready" Rooms			
Labor Calls			
Leadership Meetings			
<i>Registration</i>			
Badges			
Program Books			
Registration Kits			
Ribbons			
Computer Equipment			

	Budget	Actual	Variance
Admission Tickets			
Registration Personnel			
Décor (Booths/Headers/Signage/Lighting/Special Décor, etc.)			
Service/Information Desks			
<i>Transportation</i>			
Shipping/Drayage			
Airfare (Staff/Speakers/Leadership)			
<i>Parking</i>			
Airport Shuttle			
Limousines			
Transportation for off-site events			
<i>Printing/Postage</i>			
Advance Promotions ('Save the Date'/Reminder Notices)			
Registration Materials			
Directional/Identification signs			
General Correspondence			
Handouts			
Special Notices/Press Releases/Press kits			
Confirmation Correspondence with Registrants			
Forms/Documents			
Event Evaluation Forms			
<i>Staging and Decorations (Exhibits)</i>			
Pipe and drape for exhibits, displays			
Risers, stages			
Lighting and sound for general sessions, breakouts			
Carpet rental for hard floor registration, exhibit areas			
Podium signs			
AV mixers, operators			
Special electrical hookups			
Pads, pencils, water stations, other meeting room supplies			
<i>Fees</i>			
Legal fees/contract reviews			
Music licensing fees			
Union charges			
Refuse removal fees			
Insurance riders for special events			
Furniture and equipment rental charges			
Community taxes, fees			
Subtotal			
Grand Total			

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