

Attention to detail is the key to profitable events

Are you equipped to make the most of the opportunities that events might be able to offer your business? Here are Ken Burgin's essential tips for meeting the expectations of your customers.



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FUNCTIONS can be great business, and should be very profitable, no matter what size your venue. Numbers and costs are known in advance and you get to serve large numbers at a fixed price.

But a lot can go wrong, so efficient systems are essential. Don't let staff frustrate potential customers. There are many different types of clients, from anxious brides (and their parents), to community socials, birthday parties and celebrations. Then there are corporate clients, who have even less tolerance for error and disorganisation. They also spend considerably more money.

In a recent conversation with a corporate personal assistant her list of 'pet hates' had an all-too-familiar ring. They ranged from having too many points of contact and being "hand-balled" to different staff members, to anything being dirty, and background noise from a kitchen (see the box for the full list).

These sins can be easily avoided so check your systems to see what can be improved. Large four and five star hotels own much of this corporate market, not because they care more but because they are sticklers for detail. There's no reason why you can't grab a bigger slice of this lucrative market too.

If you want to audit the process from start to finish, roll out some paper along a table (about two metres long) and start from the left, writing in all the steps from the first phone call or email through to the 'morning after'. This is another example of the 'Cycle of Service' and is a great way to see all the steps in the process.

Gather up examples of the function diaries, confirmation letters, template forms, post-it notes, invoices etc, and place them in the sequence that you use them. How does it look? Is your Cycle of Service clear and complete, or missing some important steps? Is there unnecessary duplication, or perhaps badly designed forms that are hard to read or understand?

Here's a 'quick-fix' list of items to improve your performance:

1 Have a one-page version of your

PA's pet hates

Here's a list of a typical personal assistants' pet hates when it comes to booking an event with a caterer. Recognise any?

- Numerous points of contact.
- Being 'hand-balled' to different staff members to get answers.
- Having to chase the venue for details.
- People not following up on commitments.
- Technical hitches with AV equipment.
- Confusion over parking.
- Background noise from the kitchen.
- Unclear or incomplete agreements.
- Dirty anything: washrooms/floors/table linen/crockery/cutlery
- Debiting credit cards but not providing invoices.
- No perceived care or concern for the event.

function menus widely available — online, at the counter and in function rooms. Also mention your function offering on your regular menu. How many people even know you offer catering or special services? Make sure you tell them.

2 Fast responses get the booking. Everyone wants it 'yesterday'. You have 60 minutes to respond with your packages and booking details. Have PDF menus ready to email (or fax), standard email replies ready to send, and standard replies to common requests, as well as a list of those Frequently Asked Questions.

3 Tighten up your initial responses. That includes replying to inquiries, sending out information, speedy quotes, follow up calls and facility tours. Many bookings are lost at this early stage. Measure your bookings to inquiries percentage — your "strike rate". How's it looking?

4 Facilities are always ready for inspection. There's nothing worse than being shown a function room that doubles as a store room. Have at least part of the room set, and gather up past photos into an impressive album — on an iPad, in a book, and also online.

5 Special tactics for peak season. If you can't keep up with requests, have a form ready for customers to complete, providing the required information including numbers, menu style, dates, special needs and so on. Email this so they can return it, or put it online. This way you avoid getting bogged down on the phone with minor details. Wufoo.com is a

great service for creating online forms with email notification.

6 Only one staff member talks about prices. Everyone wants to negotiate, and a slip of the tongue by an untrained person can cause problems. Train your staff how to take the initial inquiries — have a standard form for them to work to. Then your follow-up call or email will handle the details.

7 Cost, cost, cost. When you know the profit you're making, you won't be under-charging or penny-pinching with details, and you will handle the inevitable discount request with much more confidence.

8 Every booking has a signed agreement. Period. Too much money is lost unnecessarily through no-shows or cancellations. Your agreement will be friendly, but is very clear about dates for final numbers, deposits and payments — call it a Health and Safety requirement if need be (and your agreement should mention some of those issues as well, for example, responsible service of alcohol).

9 Keep in touch, even if the inquirer doesn't make a booking. If they say no, it may mean 'not now' rather than 'no never'. Party organisers and the office person with responsibilities for bookings are highly valuable contacts. A regular follow-up email will produce results at a later stage.

Ken Burgin is a leading hospitality industry consultant. To find out more visit profitablehospitality.com or call 1800 001 353.