

LocationLocationLocation

Tips for tapping hot alternative venues

By Liz Massey



Face it – your client's catered affair will have at least one constant: it has a location. Whether the event is at the local museum, a partially completed loft or in the innards of a chic members-only club, the venue is, for some, the most important part of an event.

"Every event may not have food or entertainment, but they have to take place somewhere, says Chad Kaydo, editor-in-chief of the New York edition of *BiZ Bash*, a publication that covers the event planning world in several major metropolitan areas. "That element, from the beginning, sends a message about the event."

Howard Givner, president of the New York-based Paint the Town Red Inc., which offers a free matching service between event organizers and venues, says the drawing power of a unique venue is among the things he emphasized during a workshop he recently led for members of Meeting Planners International. "I handed out two invitations: one to an event at a hotel and one at the United Nations. The United Nations location was always rated more interesting."

Givner attributes the rise of his venue-matching service to the explosion of nonprofit agencies (and even some small-to-medium businesses) renting out their square footage. Theater troupes, dance companies, even budding photographers with a swank studio are considering renting their spaces out.

"Whenever donations are hard to come by, these venues become more open, and once they start making some money this way, they add it into the budget," he says.

Event planners mapping out soirees at Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum in New York can select which life-like celebrity wax figures they want mingling with the guests and can specify where they'd like the figurines placed, according to Givner.

"It was really weird to have them ask where we wanted certain 'people' moved," he notes.

About face

If caterers have the will to cater in novel spaces, more of them will become available for a simple reason: the need to generate extra cash.

David Paquet, owner of David Paquet Gourmet Catering in St. Catherine's, Ontario, Canada, notes that Parks Canada has done an about-face during the past decade regarding the use of historic sites for special events. "We never used to be able to use these sites," Paquet says.

What qualifies as an offbeat venue? How about a place where you can nosh with live quail?

Paquet plans to cater an upcoming charity fund-raiser at an aviary, or bird sanctuary, with an international "safari" menu (beef and shrimp entrees will be served in the bird-watching areas, he notes) complementing the wide variety of feathered species represented at the location.

Silver screen stars

As far as unique wedding venues are concerned, few nuptials can beat those held at a drive-in theater, at which the

ceremony was displayed for guests on the big screen, according to Edith R. Jakobs of Opulence Catering & Event Management in Toronto.

Bryan Young, CPCE, of Catering Plus in St. Louis recommends as his favorite wedding venue the Third Degree Glass Factory, an art glass studio, which teaches glass blowing and is open to holding events in the evening. During special events, guests are encouraged to watch demonstrations or make glass paperweights.

Sometimes it's not the uniqueness or cultural significance of a location that makes it a "hot" venue, it's the lack of amenities.

Captive wedding party

Jayne Anderson, general manager at Grace Street Catering in San Francisco, notes that she's shipped in a mobile kitchen to cater a wedding on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, and Anna

Spraungel, catering manager at McCall Catering in San Francisco, says she catered two events at Alcatraz Island.

"There's just one little dummy elevator to get things into and out of the site, and it's a long way down," she describes.

the fine print - Legal points to remember in venue contracts

Once you've found a "dream" location for your client's wedding, corporate or social event, keep your feet planted. You need to remember the legal issues. Have the client sign a contract with the facility, says hospitality lawyer Jonathan T. Howe, senior partner at Howe & Hutton Ltd. of Chicago.

"If a caterer has a venue contract going through them, I ask why the caterer is doing that," Howe says. "Have the client rent the venue."

He points out that signing a contract for an event with a facility obligates the caterer to a number of liability issues, such as injuries relating to slips and falls, the weather (at an outdoor event) or event cancellation, which are outside the caterer's control.

Often venue responsibility is confusing because the event contract fails to provide a clear description of the caterer's responsibility. Howe compares a contract to a news story; just as journalism dictates that a reporter covers who, what, when, why, how and where of an event, a diligent caterer should ensure each of those elements is covered relative to the event venue.

"A big problem with contracts is that there's no 'job description' for the caterer," Howe says. "Writing 'X will cater a meal for 250 people' is not specific enough. You need to list the number of drinks, the menu, the expectations of service, whether the event's inside or outside."



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that eat up? Will your clients want to pay \$3,000 for toilets and lighting?"

Another question at alternative venues, such as partially finished buildings, mountaintop mansions or boats, is access. Hard hats for everyone, including guests, may be required at buildings under construction; Paquet used this rule to make sure guests at a corporate function he catered went home with the hat as a party favor.

Permission slips

Occasionally, the question of access is not one of physical hardship but whether caterers can receive permission to use venues for which special events are a secondary reason for their existence; they must find and use a "point person" who represents the respective venue for all event-related matters.

Givner says this was a crucial step when Paint the Town Red decided which venues should be listed in its guide. "One

of the most important things we look for is someone who handles events. People often want revenue, but don't want to allocate staff to handle it."

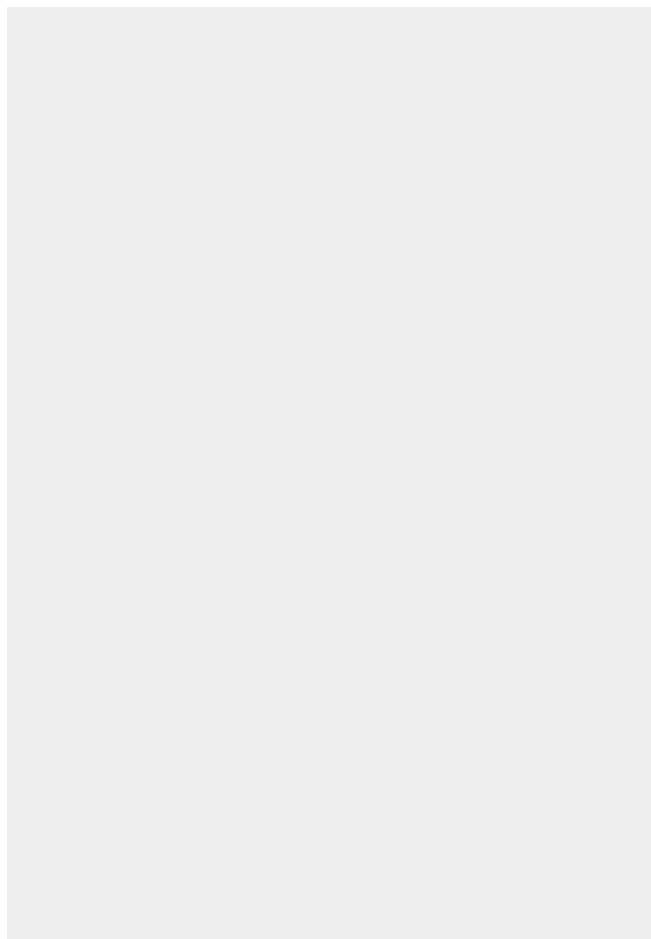
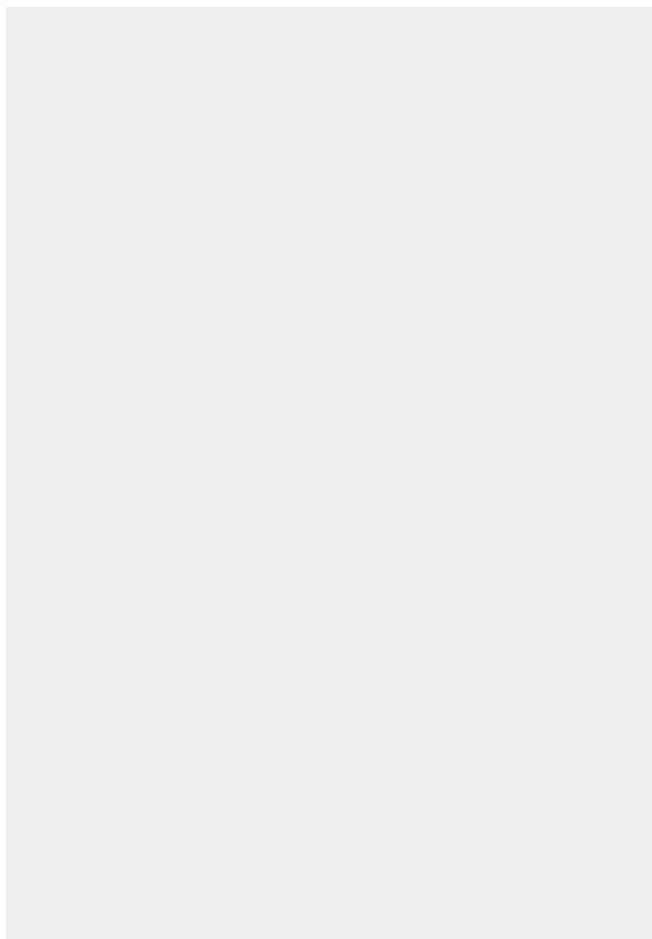
Anderson adds that working with a facility manager is essential to a successful experience. "Connect with facility managers and listen to them, they know better than you do about how things are done there."

Looking for Mr. Good Site

The easiest way to find new, offbeat venues is to scan one's daily horizon for possibilities constantly, Givner says, suggesting that caterers review the business section of their local newspaper to find commercial real estate tidbits that could point out potential venues. He adds that venue-oriented publications such as *Here Comes the Guide* for location ideas provides great tips, and he recommends investigating sites while running personal errands.

Anderson says in remote locations, the key question is budget not necessarily logistics.

"You can turn practically any space into a party space with the options available today," Anderson notes. "But the question is how much of the budget will



"I drag my family into every space I see," he says. "It gets in your blood. I'm always asking who's in charge of the space and what I could do if I took over the place for the night."

Paquet, who years ago secured abandoned mansions and other quaint locales for an environmental theater troupe, says "pioneering" a venue could be hard, and involve seemingly endless meetings with venue owners or stakeholders. However, if caterers are persistent and can convince venue owners or caretakers of the benefits that opening their space to the public will bring, the rewards could be great, he said.

"It really comes down to (your) credibility: who are you, who you have worked with, and will you respect the venue," he explains. "Keep talking, give them a reason to say yes, and address their concerns." ■

Hip digs

Unique venues that go beyond the ordinary

Ready to show your clients a party space that immediately stifles the "yawn" factor? Try these places on for size:

Warehouses: Like lofts, warehouses usually have oodles of unobstructed horizontal space. Such spaces often make a good back-up to outdoor events threatened by the elements.

Construction sites: Partially finished buildings can be great for events aimed at raising funds for the site's construction or restoration.

Back to nature: Aviaries, nature preserves and zoos are great places to highlight an outdoor or international theme.

Retail stores: Some retailers are happy to rent out their space after closing hours.

Cultural/historic spaces: In New York and other major cities, old buildings and architectural wonders with 50-foot ceilings and stained glass have been preserved and converted into meeting space.

Artist/photo studios: Mixing among a creative person's work-in-progress gives an artsy feel to any happening. Some artists will agree to provide live demonstrations during events.

Members-only clubs: While they usually require expert networking to get to the "yes" person, private clubs can guarantee a venue to a large portion of guests attending a function.