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Post-Bailout Planning

In today's atmosphere of frugality, how do you spend less without lessening your event's impact? One planner found out

By Leslie Weekes

Just three years ago, I was part of a roundtable discussion of association planners at an industry convention. Our topic was food and beverage.

I chose to sit at this table because I wanted to discuss trends, presentation and new ideas. Instead, I found myself in the middle of a discussion about guarantees, drink tickets and cash bars. These things were foreign to me. I work for an association that is "rich" — at least according to the venue that refused to waive the \$10,000 site fee for last year's gala. Well, it's not rich, but in the grand scheme of associations, it's not poor either. I have historically had a lot of flexibility in the budget when it comes to events: Fine wines. Premium open bars. The best caterers, rental companies and floral designers in the city. At our annual gala, I got carte blanche authority to showcase my creativity and work with some of Washington, D.C.'s finest artisans. My only concern every year was how to best the previous year's gala.

That was during our pre-bailout days.

The ink had not yet dried on the contract for this year's gala when I got the call. In many ways post-September 2008 feels a lot like post-September 2001, when our industry faced an unknown future and our jobs hung in the balance. Our world had changed and we weren't sure what would happen next. To my relief, I was told the event would go on and the budget and my role were safe. "However, with many of the members struggling to pay dues, facing salary and hiring freezes, and furloughs, to throw an extravagantly themed event with all of the bells and whistles of the previous years would be in poor taste, or worse, it would make us look fiscally irresponsible. At the same time, this is still a special event and should have the same feel." In other words: Do less, spend less and let it have the same impact.

A daunting task, but I was ready. In many ways this event and my planning



Photo: Aude Guerrucci

Understated but elegant floral design was part of Leslie Weekes' strategy for creating an impactful event experience without looking fiscally irresponsible.

philosophy have been in conflict. I am a minimalist. I believe less is more, and in event design, you should always take one thing away. I was cut out to do less with less. Yet, I could not imagine a special event without the red carpet, step and repeat, digital lighting and pipe and drape,

“Do less, spend less and let it have the same impact, I was told.”

custom linens and high-end rentals, \$400 floral anchor pieces and centerpieces reaching to the ceiling, goodie bags and a full production — all of the accoutrements I always felt were excessive, until I had them taken away.

When I started planning this year's gala, I kept two key questions in mind: "What do the attendees care about most? And what trade-offs are they willing to make?" I created a brief survey on Key Survey (free and easy — see keysurvey.com) and sent it to a handful of the previous year's attendees. I learned most of all that people wanted the opportunity to network with their peers. This group of high-level educators saw each other once a year, usually at this event, so this was their time to catch up and talk business, and lots of politics! They also wanted value for their money. With all of the belt tightening happening back on their campuses, to deny spending


to some departments and then turn around and spend hundreds themselves on a gala meant that the return on investment was extremely important. I felt the pressure.

The biggest trade-off for attendees was the venue. The countless hours I had spent researching venues and conducting site inspections to find a new or unique gem to host the gala was for naught. The attendees felt it was okay to host it in a hotel ballroom. This was one trade-off I wasn't willing to accept. The location is part of the experience. In the face of dissent, I decided the best way to scale back this year's gala, which I renamed the "annual dinner," was to focus on the quality of the food, cocktails, entertainment and service. Everything else was trimming and could be cut.

From the outset, I scored an honorarium-free "get" with a big-name political insider to speak informally to the group about the past election and primary season, the current administration, and even share some insider gossip, and took my direction from there.

The venue I settled on is rumored to be used often to host visiting dignitaries — a regal home filled with objets d'art from its original owners' world travels and marvelous Flemish tapestries. It also has a room painted trompe l'oeil-style and Buddhist statutes that gild the house and gardens. I added some simple up-lights to complement the existing lighting and hired a mandolinist to play jazz music in the gardens during the cocktail hour. The centerpieces were low contemporary and Asian-inspired with red ginger and yellow cymbidium orchids. And because I couldn't resist, the linens were faux dupioni silk, and it just wouldn't be a gala without the chiavaris.

For dinner, I served an epicurean meal like past years, but asked the caterer to serve it American-style versus the French-style service they do so well, and to eliminate the intermezzo. This small change immediately reduced the stuffiness factor. I also hoped it would loosen up the guests enough to sing along with the pianist I hired to play after dinner using the existing piano in the space.

At the end of the night, I greeted the guests as they filed out and readied myself for complaints or cries of disappointment. To my surprise, I got the same amount of enthusiasm and praise from the attendees as I had in the previous years. I daresay I even saw expressions of joy on some faces. 



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