

# Planning a Successful Function

*by Michael Edwards*

The following tips and suggestions are based on my personal experience as an entertainer at over 1,500 functions and as the owner of an agency that has helped thousands of clients to plan every type of function imaginable. Feel free to contact me at the agency if I can be of any service to you.

## Budget and Priorities

Ask most people to name the two most important factors that contribute to a successful function and they will probably say "good food and good music". But a year or two later, long after your guests have forgotten what they had to eat, they will still remember great entertainment and how much fun they had. We feel our agency motto says it all: "The Music Makes Or Breaks the Party". Surprisingly, some people spend more money on impressive centerpieces or decorating the hall than they do for their entertainment. A pre-meal cheese & crackers table with assorted vegetables and dip can actually cost you more than your Disc Jockey. When was the last time you heard guests leaving a function hall raving that the veggie platter really "made" the party? Every function must start with a budget. Large or small, lavish or modest, we all want the very best we can get for the amount we plan to spend. Once you have a total budget in mind, you really have to decide what your budget priorities are going to be. If food is the main focus of the party, then don't go overboard on costly extras like a full open bar or a custom "balloon designer".

If the entertainment is most important to you, why not plan a 4 course meal instead of 5 courses. You may be able to upgrade to a better Band or DJ if you don't spend too much of your budget on extra frills like 2 bottles of wine on every table, baskets in the rest rooms or an expensive dessert table. In the end, the budget priorities you set at the very start of your planning will determine the ultimate outcome of the event. Remember, "Quality doesn't cost...it pays"!

Other factors are less obvious than the music and the food, but equally important. Selecting the right location for your party can make a major difference in the outcome of the function. The planning and timing of certain events at the function can also affect the fate of your party. Failing to plan is planning to fail, some say. But overplanning your party can be just as bad. Try not to "time-schedule" your party to death, because nothing on earth involving the "human element" ever goes exactly as planned. Expect the unexpected. Allow for flexibility in your plans wherever possible. Planning your event will be far easier if you know where the problems usually occur and make advanced provisions that will prevent them from happening!

## Location, Location, Location

No, this isn't a paragraph from a Real Estate seminar. However, the location you select for your function is a choice that is vital to its success and must be chosen as carefully as your menu and musical entertainment. Location is just as important if you are planning a birthday party with just 80 guests at the local American Legion hall, or an annual corporate party for 800 at the biggest hotel in town; the questions you must ask are still the same. "Is there ample parking for all of my guests?" "Is there a large enough dance floor and how close is it to the set-up area for the Band or DJ?" Many halls and function facilities have a stage for your entertainment but then again, others do not. Keep in mind that your entertainment is a very important part of your function and should not be hidden in a corner of the room or next to the kitchen door behind a column. Ideally, your Band or DJ should be located in front of the dance floor in the center of the room. This enables all guests to see and hear the show equally. Some function facilities do not consider this factor and arbitrarily place the music at the far end of the room, away from the dance floor and surrounded by tables of guests while an ice sculpture or mobile bar is placed in a better location! Needless to say, to reach your guests on the dance floor from across the room, the music at such an undesirable location would be quite loud for those guests seated at the tables inbetween. If such a set-up is unavoidable, ask for a stage or platform to raise the entertainment above ground level. This will help with both visibility and acoustics. A good function facility will work with you and change from their usual set-up practices if you bring these factors to their attention.

I have seen many clients painstakingly select a historic old mansion, impressive museum or a charming little restaurant with an adjoining pub for their function. Great choices for atmosphere, but once again, questions must be asked. "Can my entertainment gain access to the facility to set up in advance of the rental time?" "Is there sufficient power for a full band or will older "historic" circuitry cause blown fuses and power outages?" "Is there air conditioning or adequate heat and enough rest rooms for the comfort of my guests?" "Will all of my guests be able to see and hear the entertainment, or will some guests be alienated in separate rooms (or even on separate floors), away from important announcements and the musical entertainment."

An adjacent pub or a bar located in another room will split your guests into groups and may ruin an otherwise cohesive function. Diverting too many guests from the main room usually means the dance floor will suffer. Borderline dancers who might have otherwise been inspired to dance due to a packed dance floor may decide to call it a night. Good entertainment only needs an audience, and the full potential of any show is always better with a packed house. An audience that has another place to congregate can divide (and conquer your function).

A function location that is far off the beaten path and unfamiliar to your guests will usually result in more than a few late arrivals. A surprise party is ruined if late arrivals bump into the arriving guest of honor out in the parking lot. I have also seen parties where the guest of honor or important family members have arrived an hour or more late, due to poor directions! Don't rely on word of mouth for directions. Print up a set. Take a test run to double check the directions before you give them to anyone.

## **Timing Is Everything**

If you are planning a surprise party, invite guests 30 to 45 minutes before the scheduled arrival time for your guest of honor. This way, any late comers will probably be there in enough time to cheer the guest of honor's arrival and not spoil the surprise. This tactic is not as crucial for older audiences, such as the peer group at a 50th anniversary or an 80th birthday party. Older folks generally arrive quite early. I mean Tuesday for a Saturday night party! They also seem to have an internal alarm clock that tells them when they've had enough, and, regardless of how great your entertainment is, they sometimes leave early too. That's how they got to be that age in the first place...they don't overdo it!

We suggest starting your music at the arrival time that you listed on the invitations, since older guests will already be there and everyone else will arrive to a musically festive "party" atmosphere rather than walking into a room of dead silence and someone still setting up. It's also a good idea to post a look-out at the door 10 or 15 minutes before the scheduled arrival time of your guest of honor. Your entertainment will alert the audience when the lookout signals their arrival. Plan on about 15 minutes of walk-about greetings and hellos after the guest of honor first arrives. The meal or buffet should be started soon after, since your guests will have been there about an hour at this point and should be getting hungry. Let your Band leader or DJ know if you plan on a toast or a blessing before the meal. They will be happy to co-ordinate these for you.

Most Bands and DJs book for a 4 hour minimum. Many halls and function facilities book in 5 hour blocks. In general, this allows time for an initial cocktail hour followed by dinner (usually allow 1 1/2 to 2 hours) and then dancing until the conclusion. If you need 5 hours of entertainment (to include such a cocktail hour) simply add an hour of overtime with your entertainment in advance. Don't book a party for more than 4 hours if the majority of guests are over 60 years old. Leave it flexible so that if your guests are having a great time and still dancing up a storm in the final hour, you have the option of adding overtime on the spot with both the hall and your entertainment. We even pro-rate our overtime in money-saving half hour increments for maximum flexibility for our clients.

## **Seating Advice**

Another important decision involves your function's seating arrangement. Try to arrange your tables so that older guests are not right next to the music. The volume that is necessary to adequately cover a large room may be too loud at the source for older guests when they have been seated right next to the speakers. Younger guests are usually not upset by the music being nearby. For corporate clients, please don't seat the CEO and members of the Board of Directors right up front next to the music. It is all but impossible for your Band or DJ to entertain and inspire 300+ guests to dance and have fun while playing at a whisper for the sake of conversation at nearby tables.

## Buffets and Serving Stations

The best time to start a buffet or serving stations is right after the cocktail hour concludes or within 15 minutes of the arrival of your guest of honor. Tables may be called by your MC in any order that you decide. Please have a list ready in advance if the order is not sequential, starting with table number one. Serving Stations or Buffets that have been set up on or around the dance floor should be removed after a pre-determined time limit. You should specify this detail to your function co-ordinator or caterer, as tables left on the dance floor will delay getting the party started after the meal is over. This will maximize the dancing/entertainment time for your guests. If possible, always try to keep mobile bars, sweet tables, cappuccino machines and any other after dinner option in the same room as the entertainment. Remember, an audience that has another place to congregate can divide (and conquer your function).

## Music and the Sit-Down Meal

During dinner, the right music played at a comfortable volume level can make a good meal even more enjoyable. All caterers, country clubs, hotels, restaurants and function facilities are concerned with basically the same thing: serving you and your guests a good hot meal. Ask your caterer how long they think the meal itself will last. This will depend on the number of courses, the number of people at your function and the efficiency of the service. While it is difficult to predict an exact time due to all the variables, the average sit-down meal usually lasts about 1 1/2 to 2 hours. I have seen many a function nearly ruined by a 3+ hour meal that leaves little or no time for dancing afterwards. One good way to save the day is to allow guests to dance in-between dinner courses. It can make a long, drawn-out, multi-course meal pass more quickly and also "warms up" the audience for the faster dancing to follow. Although most people do not realize it, a good Band or DJ is always aware of which course is being served, eaten or cleared. For example, if your guests are up dancing between courses and the next course comes out from the kitchen, I find it best to complete the song being played as soon as possible, announce to the audience that the next course is being served, and allow those on the dance floor to sit down and eat. This helps your caterer in two ways:

1. the meal is not prolonged by the music **and**
2. guests dancing between courses will not sit around wondering why the next course is taking so long.

Some function managers discourage or even forbid any dancing during the meal because of repeated bad experiences with amateur DJs or bands playing fast dance music during dinner and keeping guests from their food. When you consider that this means you and your guests may have to endure up to 2 hours of humdrum background music, such an inflexible hall policy is not in the best interest of your function. The

best compromise is for the band or DJ to play a nice mixture of “easy listening” danceable dinner music during the preliminary courses and then, as soon as the main course is served, announce the main course to the audience and then play some soft background music so that any dancers will then return to their tables with everyone else to enjoy the main course. This is an ideal time for your Band or DJ to take their dinner break, since nobody will be dancing until after the main course is through.

## **Top 5 Function Planning Tips**

- Speeches, awards and presentations should be made immediately after the main course, prior to dessert and coffee. It will take your catering staff a long time to clear the main course, since not everyone finishes at the same time. If you have a head table, principals and any guests of honor are usually served first, and hence are finished first. That makes this is the perfect time for any such formalities. It is never a good idea to do a few speeches now and a few later because once the party gets started, momentum and continuity on the dance floor are vital factors. The same can be said for raffles or drawings. Nothing is more annoying to dancers than to interrupt a packed dance floor every fifteen minutes, turn up the house lights and draw another raffle ticket. Talk about killing the mood! Saving the raffle till some point near the end of the night will also keep the crowd “captive” longer.
- The Guest of Honor is the “heart and soul” of any function. Once in a while the guest of honor and several key family or company members will be called outside of the main room for important photographs or for video interviews during the main dance set, after the meal. Remember, a prolonged period without the guest of honor and all those additional attendees will cause the party to suffer. Guests who are not in the room cannot participate. Guests who are still in the room have no reason to celebrate if the guest of honor is missing. If keeping the guests dancing at the function is important to you, try to arrange for special photographs to be taken just before or after the party, while everyone involved is still in attendance.
- Overplanning your music can actually hinder dancing during the function. A well-meaning client who provides a long list of all their favorite songs in advance unwittingly eliminates the musical flexibility needed by the entertainment to please the diverse musical tastes of a typical audience. An experienced music professional will “read” the crowd and know how to blend different styles of music to include not only your requests, but also the best of the requests from your guests and their own “can’t miss” choices. Their goal is the same as yours: to keep the dance floor full and include all age groups. Have confidence in your entertainment... if they have played at hundreds of other successful functions they are best qualified to select a perfect musical mixture from all of the suggestions that they receive.

- Some photographers or videographers offer a 20 minute “This Is Your Life” type of slide or video presentation that is sometimes scheduled to be shown on the dance floor in the middle of the function. When you consider the show’s set-up and breakdown time, it can kill an hour of dance time while your paid entertainment sits and waits. If possible, schedule this wonderful trip down memory lane either right before or immediately after the meal, to maximize guests’ dancing time.
- If more than 2 or 3 small children will be attending your party, their typical innocent activities (ie: running around, jumping and sliding unsupervised on the dance floor) will inhibit guests from dancing for fear of hurting these little ones. Check to see if your function facility has any other separate area available to you during your function. If not, away from the dance floor, designate a special “kids table”, which is decorated to appeal to the youngsters. Find a reliable caretaker to watch the kids, supervise their meal and then entertain them with coloring, games and activities throughout your event. This proven method is great for the kids, but also gives their parents a chance to enjoy the party and dance knowing their children are safe and well cared for. Meanwhile, you are saving the dance floor exclusively for the dancers.

## **Lighting & Atmosphere**

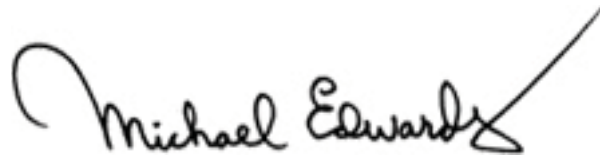
The musical entertainment you choose for your function has the responsibility of “getting the crowd going”. In other words, making sure that everyone in the audience is being entertained, dances and has fun. This job is much more difficult when the room’s lights are too bright. Time and time again I have seen the number of people on the dance floor increase just as soon as the lights are dimmed to a lower level. Light dimmer switches are sometimes controlled by a bartender or manager who may not realize how important the atmosphere is to the success of your function. Other factors can effect the level of lighting as well. A well-meaning guest or relative with a home video camera may keep requesting that the lights be turned up so that he or she can get a better picture. Good professional photographers and videographers usually have portable lights that go where their cameras go. Depending on their equipment, the house lights can usually still be dimmed without effecting the quality of their work. Unfortunately, if the lights do go up too much, there may be nobody left on the dance floor to film! You have to decide what is most important to you and try to address these possible areas of conflict in advance by leaving explicit lighting instructions with the function manager.

## A Happy Ending

When a successful function approaches the end, quite often the question of overtime arises. Unfortunately, once in a while the Band or DJ says "yes" but the hall says "no". I have seen halls agree to an overtime hour only if the bar closes first (liquor liability). To be safe, make sure you know the function facility's overtime policy, price and time limits on the bar, if any. It is also a good idea to find out in advance the overtime rates of all the other professionals involved in your function. This will help avoid any misunderstandings if things are really going well and you decide to keep things rolling for another hour.

The time to let your entertainment know you want an extra hour is about 40 minutes before the regular scheduled ending time. The reason that this is so important is that most good Bands and DJs try to build their musical performance to a peak toward the end of the night. They can save certain songs for the end, if they know a bit in advance that they will be playing longer. It may seem like an awful lot to remember, but you now have a headstart that will help to make your next party everything you want it to be. Great entertainment will certainly help you to accomplish that goal as well. We look forward to being a part of your plans.

Best of Luck,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Edwards". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'M' and a long, thin tail extending upwards and to the right.