

TIPS FROM A PRO »

# SELECTING THE RIGHT PARTNER

The critical role of A/V and event planning. BY SUSAN DUNKELMAN

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGING, and that has never been truer than when it comes to selecting an A/V partner and deciding whether the in-house A/V vendor or an outside third-party provider is the right partner for you. Due to advancements in technology, lighting and other A/V equipment that has come down in price, planners are now finding opportunities to use previously out of budget technology with a much more palatable price tag.

When choosing a partner, there are many pros and cons to be factored in, and your budget should not be the only driver in your decision-making. Whether you or your trusted event planner are making the final call, it's crucial to first keep in mind your desired outcome as well as the expectations of your attendees.

One of the most important things people tend to overlook is the creative aspect of the event planning process. Often, securing A/V is done with a reverse approach, which means considering the logistical and budget aspects first, rather than taking the time to really look and see what impact the projected role of the A/V and lighting will have on the event. Today, with our culture of social sharing, you can't afford to just consider the technical knowledge of your proposed vendor; it's also crucial to examine what they can contribute in terms of how savvy they are and what cutting-edge offerings they have.

With any venue, but especially large ones, lighting is an easy and cost-effective way to fill the space and have a dramatic impact. In other instances, your needs may be minimal and the lighting is just providing accents, so an external A/V vendor may not be worth the cost. Some A/V and production partners can build large custom audio-visual props for you, while others can simply provide equipment from a picklist.

For conferences with numerous breakout sessions, it's often worth the additional cost of bringing an external, trusted vendor in to work with the in-house team to bring added


expertise and creativity in the general session room. After you have decided the scope of your A/V/production work, then it's time to take the following into consideration:

1. Are you creating multiple events in different cities and venues? This is where having a relationship with one production team can provide consistency, peace of mind and a broader vision of your goals and objectives.
2. Who is the in-house vendor? Consider meeting the in-house team to learn more about their offerings and expertise. Some hotels have internationally known in-house A/V brands that bring a large inventory and a lot of experience to in-house events. Others may utilize boutique creative events firms that bring an extra level of customer service and focus on creativity, instead of the standard approach of some other in-house teams. Never be afraid to request references to help you with your decision.
3. What is the make-up of your venue? Is it an older or unusual building, where it would be a plus to use the in-house team that knows all the ins and outs of the space? Ask

any external vendors you are considering if they have experience in your venue(s). Often, they will have worked there before and will help you navigate all the must-know rules and quirks of your venue.

4. Do they work within your available budget? Although we recommend not concentrating solely on budget when making decisions, it's of course a fact that costs do have to be considered as budget compliance is critical for events of any size. It's not just the straight cost to consider, but all the extras such as the inclusion of staff, overtime, usage fees and more. Some hotels add a penalty fee within their contract for bringing in an external A/V vendor, and others offer enticing concessions and discounts for using their in-house team. Sometimes you can still benefit from these concessions if your external vendor subcontracts with the in-house team for equipment.

5. Are they equipped to handle an equipment malfunction? It's always important to consider not only the size of the team, but also the back-up, replacement gear they have readily available.

No matter what your ultimate decision is, your A/V contract should be read thoroughly before being signed, and ongoing open communication is key. It's a known fact in the industry that there can often be hidden fees associated with A/V orders. The right vendor will be transparent with you, but not all are. Don't be afraid to negotiate and ask questions. 



As managing partner of The Charles Group, Inc. **SUSAN DUNKELMAN** creatively conceptualizes meetings and events and plans and executes them to perfection, delivering memorable events both within the US and globally. Prior to forming The Charles Group, Inc. in 1987, she served as director of conferences for the Risk and Insurance Management Society (RIMS).