

partnering with venues

What Planners Should Know

We interviewed expert managers to seek their insights into how a planner can best prepare for working with an event venue. We hope you draw lots of ideas and wisdom from their years of excellent service with event planners!



Kelsey Kryl

Event Planning Manager
Hyatt Regency O'Hare Chicago



Ted Woolford

Senior Event Manager
Charlotte Convention Center



Dave McCabe

Assistant Director of
Convention Services
Hershey Lodge



Susan Lojacono

Convention Services and Sales
Hyatt Regency Sarasota

What common challenges arise when planners work with venues, and how can these challenges be effectively addressed or avoided?



Kelsey: The most common challenge I face is planners not **reviewing their paperwork**. If the sales manager or venue planner took the time to put something in your contract or BEO's, it's because we think it's important to the success of your program. We know these documents can be lengthy and time-consuming, but we promise that thoroughly reviewing these items, especially if the planner was not the contract signer, will save time and money.



Dave: One common challenge we face as Convention Services Managers is **managing multiple events simultaneously**. Planners should seek out details regarding other events meeting at the same time in the venue. Ask, *"How will those attendees cross paths with my attendees?"* A short conversation or minor adjustment to a program's timing can make a world of difference in all groups having the best experience.

Another common challenge we hear from our planners is **the need for flexibility**. As an independent property in Hershey, we are able to be creative and work with planners to meet requests. We often design custom menus or work with planners on creative solutions to ensure successful programs. Asking in advance about the venue's flexibility would be high on my list as a planner.



Ted: Some of the most **common challenges I've faced:**

- Construction projects in and near a venue.
- Personnel changes on my team and the planner's team.
- A city not being welcoming to groups.
- A convention center or hotel without needed audio-visual equipment for the group size.
- Elevators and escalators were not working correctly.
- High parking prices or not enough parking close to the venue.
- Proper access for people using scooters and wheelchairs.
- Consider weather changes that come with different seasons.

The best way to avoid these challenges is a **thorough on-site tour**, so you can ask questions beyond the basics covered in the RFP.



Susan: **Budget** is the first impediment for planners, and it is imperative that they know how much they can spend. To help guide planners, I use **key questions** to get a picture of the planner's needs. As we progress to finalizing plans, we must ensure we are on the same page with our "lingo," **defining terms and language**. Right away, I explain the clauses and work with the client to feel comfortable with the contract language. I also **outline my steps** to furnish the planner with first a proposal, then a contract, and then on to the planning and execution.

“It’s always great to host a planner in person so they can visualize their meeting.”

- SUSAN LOJACONO

What are some best practices to foster clear communication between planners and venue staff?



Kelsey: In terms of discussing important details like menus, guaranteed final counts, etc., emails are my preferred method of communication. A scheduled meeting or phone call can, of course, be beneficial in answering questions that need clarification or anything requiring a lengthier discussion. Still, following up with an **email summarizing vital details is always best.** Having an email or something in writing to fall back on helps us stay organized and allows us to provide you with the best experience.



Dave: Our favorite planners who visit Hershey are organized and clear communicators! Some of the best practices we see include providing **detailed meeting specifications** for events. Providing **clear agendas** and details for your program sets up all parties for success and allows venue partners to serve as strong partners in putting together plans for your event. The other key to partnering with your venue is to **talk through the planning timeline** of the venue. Identify key dates to keep the planning process on track and organized for all partners.



Ted: I suggest that planners be very comprehensive in finding out as much as possible and **ask lots of questions**, including: *When can my staff access the venue each day? How late can we stay? How early or late can attendees enter and leave the venue? Do you have plans in case of inclement weather, like snow, heavy rain, or even a hurricane? How does the city handle protests and extreme weather? What other groups are in the venue or nearby during our event? What other events are happening in the city during the meeting? What security do you provide during our event?*



Susan: **Email communication** documents both the chronology of back-and-forth negotiations and serves as a helpful tool for clarification should a misunderstanding arise. It’s always great to **host a planner in person** so they can visualize their meeting. If not, I send pictures because it helps them imagine their event in that room.

How might planners maximize their budgets without compromising quality when working with a venue?



Kelsey: For my planners working with a tighter budget, I always recommend modifying one of the venue's existing menus versus going straight to a custom menu. Customized menus containing items the venue doesn't already order can get pricey, not only for the planner but for the venue, too! If the cost to the venue increases, the planner's cost will likely also increase. **Modifying an existing menu** guarantees the venue already carries those items, which helps keep the venue's food costs low by increasing the likelihood they'll be able to resell any non-perishable items - a win for your budget AND sustainability!



Dave: Take advantage of **resort or venue offerings**. For instance, we offer guests free admission to Hershey Gardens and The Hershey Story Museum. Often, we can incorporate these activities into programs for planners.

Reception events continue to be popular for attendee engagement. Be sure to **ask for consumption reports** following these events to eliminate waste for future events. Ask your venue partner what upgrades to your program can provide the most significant impact.



Ted: A good starting place to get a realistic picture of costs is to **ask an experienced planner who recently met in the venue**. Often, the venue will provide you with contacts from recent groups. Another way to save is to build your volunteer team. **Ask for volunteers** from local churches or organizations to help with tasks, welcoming and giving directions.



Susan: First, **knowing your group's habits**, likes, and dislikes goes a long way. Tell us up front if you know your group are day-long coffee drinkers! That goes for anything they desire as a group. Perhaps they prefer their room with crescent rounds instead of classroom-style.

“Following up with an email summarizing vital details is always best.”

- KELSEY KRYL

BONUS: TOP 3 KEYS to partnering with venues:



Kelsey

- 1 Agree on a timeline and be aware of any deadlines your venue gives.** Many venues have union regulations to adhere to for scheduling staff, which could significantly affect your program if event details and rooming lists are not submitted on time. Venues want to ensure enough time to get BEOs back to you with extra time to review.
- 2 Take advantage of the technology and tools** your venues offer. Collaborative diagramming, rooming list templates, and planner portals can all seem overwhelming, but they are designed with planners of ALL skill levels in mind. You don't need to be a technology guru to use these tools, and your venue planner should be an expert in troubleshooting, so ask if you need help!
- 3 Be clear and direct about your group's needs and expectations.** And if you don't know what you want, that's ok too! Don't be afraid to tell us if you're a new planner. Remember, we are on your team. We want you and your event to be a success!



Dave

- 1 Clear Communication of Goals & Objectives** – We want your program to succeed! Providing a clear vision of what success looks like allows a venue to cater to your group's specific needs.
- 2 Make your Venue Partner Part of your Team** – The best planners we work with make our Convention Services Managers part of their teams. Developing strong relationships with your CSM will elevate your service experience.
- 3 Transparency and Honesty are Key** – We work to find win-win outcomes when collaborating with our planners. Building trust opens the doors to solving challenges. *If all else fails – eat chocolate!*



Ted

- 1 Give accurate budget estimates.**
- 2 Be clear about who the decision makers are** from your staff.
- 3 Provide regular updates on your attendee numbers** and their food and beverage needs.



Susan

- 1 Share your group's history**, including the history of your past meetings. This background gives us important insights into how we might best serve your event.
- 2 Share why you are considering our destination.** This information lets us know what is important to you and your attendees. Many of our groups stay extra days to take advantage of our pool, activities, and proximity to the beach.
- 3 Consistent, ongoing communication is a huge key to success.** During negotiation, the planner must **be clear about their needs, expectations, and parameters.** Because my priority for them is establishing room blocks, I try to be very clear from the onset that we will provide **a weekly update** so they can prompt their attendees to reserve rooms.