

A/V, Demystified

IMPROVE EVENT PRESENTATIONS — AND BUDGETS — WITH THESE STRATEGIES

BY RACHEL CARTER

Let's be honest: Most meeting planners aren't comfortable with audiovisual.

"A/V is kind of like buying a used car," said Eric Bracht, managing director of AVaStar and senior consultant, A/V operations for Maryland-based Electro-Media Design, an A/V consulting and design firm.

"You know you need it, but you don't know much about it. You know it's expensive, and you know the deal you get varies greatly depending on who you're talking to."

A/V can be a struggle for planners because they're already dealing with a tsunami of details and because "A/V can be very confusing and very technical, and we're not necessarily experts in it," said Sally Mainprize, owner of Iron Peacock Events in Arlington, Texas. "It's one of those things that if something goes wrong, it's big when it goes wrong."

We spoke with three A/V experts to get insights on how meeting planners can improve and streamline A/V at their events while keeping costs reasonable.

BEGIN NEAR THE END

When it comes to A/V, some say the best place to begin is toward the end. Holding off for as long as possible to gather as much information as possible is better than forcing a request for proposal too early, said Stephen O'Connor, owner and CEO of Denver-based O'Design Productions and Consulting, which provides audiovisual productions, consulting and training.

By nailing down the itinerary, schedule, speakers and presentations, planners will have a more complete understanding of their A/V needs. It's fine to have a couple holes in the big picture, but seeking bids too early means information gaps and unknowns, which create inefficiencies and complexities that can lead to higher costs.

O'Connor recommends having an A/V company on standby, ready for a quick turn with as much information as possible.

"The unknown is where things get confusing, frustrating and expensive," he said. "That simple information is so important for an A/V company to be able to bid correctly."

On when to seek bids:
"Just wait until you have as much information as possible. It will save a tremendous amount of stress and time and provide a great understanding of the budget."



Stephen O'Connor

OWNER, CEO

O'Design Productions and Consulting

Experience: Over 20 years

**On the value of quality A/V:
“It doesn’t matter if the
meeting is small or if the
speaker is high-level; the
whole point of having people
in a room is to sit, to listen, to
learn, and if they can’t do those
things, you’ve lost the whole
point of being in the room.”**



Sally Mainprize

OWNER, EVENT YODA

Iron Peacock Events

Experience: 23 years

If a planner knows the sessions, sizes, strategies and speakers, it helps gauge A/V needs, Mainprize said. She tries to have A/V needs at least 90% pinned down before going to bid.

Knowing the room size and layout for a general session determines the proper size and number of screens. A campfire-style breakout may need no A/V. A session with fewer than 40 people may not need to be miked, unless the speaker is soft-spoken. Q&A means microphones for the audience, but will those be on stationary stands, or will runners need handheld mics?

“You need to understand the environment so you can understand how to get the proper A/V for the size and setting of the room,” Mainprize said.

EVERY EVENT IS CUSTOM

When it comes to A/V, there is no checklist.

“You just can’t approach A/V thinking there’s a formula; there’s no formula,” O’Connor said. “It’s a custom build every single time.”

However, there are some common components. About 70% of most A/V needs are basic voice amplification and presentation setups, Bracht said.

“The business gets done in those smaller rooms where I have a presentation to show and you need to hear me,” he said.

Most speakers will have a visual presentation, which requires a screen, a projector and a laptop. Sessions with more than 60 attendees or in a room larger than 1,000 square feet need a microphone.

Larger general sessions go beyond the basics, but how far beyond depends on the event: multiple screens, staging with a podium, ambient lighting for the room, stage lighting for the presenter, even concert-style rigging.

CONTROLLING COSTS

Just as there’s no formula for A/V needs, there’s no formula for A/V budgets.

“From meeting to meeting, it’s so very unique,” Mainprize said.

Some venues try to require events to use in-house services or an exclusive provider.

“We’re not going to agree to only use in-house A/V services or to pay a penalty if we use somebody else,” Mainprize said. But she will agree to let the venue bid.

She recommends getting bids from the venue and from outside A/V providers. Once, a venue quoted her \$21,000 for basic A/V for three rooms; she ended up going outside and paying \$8,000.

If planners have experience with their meeting, a good starting point for the budget is what they spent last time, Bracht said. Otherwise, planners should work with a production partner, an A/V provider or somebody at the hotel to work out a budget.

Planners sometimes don't understand the two or three or four things that have to happen to get to the one thing they want, Bracht said. If you want to have live video of the presenter showing on the screen in real time, you need a camera, and that means stage lighting, which means rigging. A consultant or an A/V partner can help planners understand those implications and help eliminate or reduce items to cut costs.

General sessions will usually require labor because lighting, staging, rigging and sound systems are almost never built in, Bracht said. To minimize costs, planners should allow ample setup and teardown time so they don't end up paying for more crew or for overtime. Planners should also have 24-hour holds on their rooms, so they can set it and leave it.

Another expense that can surprise planners is the cost to run power because "those lighting and sound systems can't simply be plugged into the wall," Bracht said.

O'Connor recommends asking if the venue is a union facility and, specifically, if A/V labor is union or nonunion; hotel staff may be union, while A/V labor is not — or vice versa.

Planners should also ask the venue about when A/V staff will be available and determine when to have technicians on hand, such as during the keynote speaker or CEO's presentation.

COMB THROUGH THE CONTRACT

The contracting phase is key when it comes to A/V. Planners should carefully read the entire contract, not just the A/V section, because A/V can pop up anywhere, O'Connor said.

"It's broken up into power and internet and loading docks," he said. "There's about 18 different ways a venue might charge for A/V."

Planners should carefully comb through the contract for little "Easter eggs" and clarify any vague verbiage. Recently, O'Connor saw where a venue added two words — "breakout rooms" — in a section, which would have required the event to use in-house A/V services for all breakout rooms, but "an outside A/V company won't want to just do a general session for an event."

Language such as "current loading dock rates will apply" means "the venue can charge you literally whatever they want to," he said. O'Design saw one venue charge an A/V company \$10,000 a day to be in the building because the contract didn't specify pricing.

Planners are "greatly impacted by their contracts," O'Connor said. "The contracts are the determining factor of what's going to happen with A/V."

**On handling A/V successfully:
"The best way is to have some type of A/V-knowledgeable person on their team, whether that person works for them or they bring someone in, whether that's a consultant or actual A/V production company they work with and trust."**



Eric Bracht

**SENIOR CONSULTANT,
A/V OPERATIONS**

Electro-Media Design

Experience: Nearly 30 years