

Bang FOR YOUR Buck



IT'S BEEN NEARLY FOUR YEARS since insurance giant AIG—fresh off an \$85 billion government bailout—spent \$440,000 on a weeklong retreat for its top-performing brokers, initiating an era of anti-meetings ire in the government, the media and the public.

Since then, much has changed. The financial industry has bounced back from the brink of collapse, companies have begun trading fiing for hiring and the recession has finally turned into a recovery.

One thing that hasn't changed however is the public scrutiny of spending on meetings and events. In September 2011, government auditors alleged that the U.S. Department of Justice spent \$4,200 on 250 muffins—\$16 per muffin—at a 2009 conference. Although “muffin” was actually hotel shorthand for a full continental breakfast, the resulting “Muffingate” controversy spawned 223 news stories—most of them negative—in the span of just one week, according to *The Huffington Post*.

The risks to their reputation, combined with post-recession battle cries for fiscal responsibility and ROI, means meeting planners are more conscious of cost, as well as quality, than ever before.

“Planners always are looking to save money due to budgetary limitations and continually trying to do more with less,” says Leslie Wright, senior vice president of destination sales and services at Meet Minneapolis. “The recession has caused all corporations and associations to look at meeting- and travel-related budget items in order to save as much money as possible.”

Luckily, the meetings industry is ripe with bargains—provided you know where to look. With that in mind, here are 25 tips to put you on the path toward low-cost, high-value meetings:

VALUE-ADDED VENUES

- 1. Smarten your site selection:** The most affordable destinations often are smaller cities with a low cost of living. To find them, Brent Foerster, vice president of marketing and sales at VISIT Milwaukee, recommends consulting the Runzheimer International Meal and Lodging Index, which compares the average cost of first-class lodging and three meals per delegate, per day for most U.S. cities.

“If you cannot find Runzheimer data, try and compare federal per diem rates for hotel rooms and meals,” says Foerster. “You can use this comparison to find out the affordability of a destination.”
- 2. Find free money:** “Ask about incentive funding or grants from your CVB,” says Janine Wachter, CMP, director of convention and event services for the Greater Madison CVB, in Madison, Wis. “A lot of bureaus have those things to offer or know where grants are, and they can help with the application process.”
- 3. Don't go big, go home:** “For small to mid-sized meetings, investigate what the destination has to offer in terms of small inns or rental homes,” suggests Celestino Ruffini, director of sales and marketing for the Galena/Jo Daviess County CVB in Galena, Ill.
- 4. Think outside the box:** Weather permitting, consider outdoor spaces. “Don't be afraid of nature,” Ruffini says. “If you do not have a pressing need for audiovisual equipment, use an outdoor venue—usually at minimal cost.”
- 5. Be flexible:** When dates are negotiable, prices are, too. “You could hold your event on a Sunday or Monday versus a Friday or Saturday,” says Madonna Carr, vice president of destination services at Meet Minneapolis. “Venues have lower demand on those days.”
- 6. Perfect your RFP:** Clearly outlining your budget in your request for proposal will help venues meet your needs. “In your RFP, stress areas that are high cost and ask suppliers how they can help lower costs in those areas,” says Carla Conner-Penzabene, director of sales for the Detroit Metro CVB.

FRUGAL FOOD & BEVERAGE

- 7. Seek an open catering policy:** Look for a convention center with an open catering policy, suggests Denise DeJulio, executive director of convention sales at the Kansas City CVA in Kansas City, Mo. “This way, you can find a caterer to fit your budget and still have the capability to use the city’s premier meeting venue,” she says.
- 8. Take it to the streets:** Forget traditional banquets, advises Dan O’Connell, president of Visit Fort Wayne, the Fort Wayne, Ind CVB. “This style of entertainment is becoming passé, and is traditionally very high in cost,” he says. “Instead, we have found great success by suggesting that meeting planners take their event out into the community where they can find affordable and fun options, such as progressive dinners and dine-arounds.”
- 9. Purchase by the piece:** For breaks and breakfasts, avoid purchasing per person, advises meeting planner Marjorie Risinger, CMP, principal of MYR Consultants in Hermosa Beach, Calif. “Look at the prices on the menu for coffee by the gallon and pastries or cookies by the dozen and decide how many you need,” she says.
- 10. Skip a meal:** Because many attendees would rather see the city than the inside of another hotel ballroom, consider cutting out a lunch or dinner and allowing attendees to experience local restaurants on their own, suggests Wachter. Meeting planners can skip a meal by negotiating it into attendees’ room rate, she says.
- 11. Empower the chef:** Although you can establish your budget many years in advance, you can’t predict food costs, according to Risinger, who says the best way to save money on food and beverage is to let the chef choose the menu. “For example, instead of saying, ‘I want a filet at \$35 in four years,’ say, ‘I want to serve beef and I can only spend \$35 per person’ four years out,” she advises. “This gives the chef the opportunity to choose what’s plentiful at that time and what fits into your budget.”



- 12. Serve lunch for dinner:** Because lunch portions are smaller, they’re also less expensive. “I remember one time I had a budget of \$65 and there was nothing on the printed menus that fit my budget,” Risinger recalls. “But there was a nice filet for lunch for \$35. I asked if I could serve lunch for dinner and the chef said, ‘Yes, but I’m going to charge you \$10 more.’ So I got a filet for \$45 instead of the \$60 price on the diner menu.”
- 13. Larger groups live large:** If you’re serving a large group, ask for a discount. “The more a venue serves the same thing, the easier it is for the kitchen,” Risinger says. “If your group is smaller, find out if there’s another group in the hotel and what they are serving. Maybe you can [coordinate with] them.”

PENNY WISE PRODUCTION

- 14. Reuse:** Save on décor by reusing it. “You can buy lighting gobos—they’re basically metal piece that fit over lights—for a couple hundred dollars; they’re really beautiful but very inexpensive, and you can reuse them many times over,” Wachter says.
Plastic name badge holders can be reused too, she adds.
- 15. Borrow signage:** “Some facilities and hotels have in-house signage,” Wachter says. “Ask for it. Also, try to use screens for electronic signage when facilities have them.”
- 16. Show locals love:** Don’t pay a premium for speakers, staff and entertainment. Instead, bring in local talent from colleges and universities, suggests Wachter.
Student volunteers from event planning and hospitality programs might be willing to man the registration desk or serve as room monitors, a small string quartet or a student acappella group may be able to provide low-cost entertainment, and professors often make great expert speakers, she says.

AFFORDABLE AV

- 17. Take charge of changes:** “Try not to

have any last-minute changes,” Carr says. “Make sure you are the primary person handling requests—not the speakers.”

- 18. Be mindful of room sets:** Put speakers with AV needs in the same breakout rooms to avoid extraneous fees associated with setting up, striking and moving equipment. “Make sure all the sessions that need AV are in a specific room,” Wachter says.
- 19. Confirm speakers’ needs:** “Double check that the requested AV is needed,” Wachter says.
- 20. Bring it, don’t buy it:** “If you can coordinate equipment and bring it, versus renting it from the venue, that could help,” Wright notes.
- 21. Skip the projector:** “Projectors can be your priciest item,” Ruffini says. If you have a “connected” crowd, she suggests, consider having attendees view presentation decks on their laptops, tablets or smartphones instead.



THRIFTY TRANSIT

- 22. Partner with providers:** Transportation and cab companies often offer group discounts, according to Wachter, who also suggests looking for hotels with free airport shuttles.
- 23. Drive costs down:** “Cities where attendees have an option to drive-in versus fly-in can save attendees a tremendous amount of money,” Conner-Penzabene says.
- 24. Walk it off:** “When planners are doing site selection, they can cut down on transportation costs if they find a city that’s walkable,” Wachter says.
- 25. Take the bus:** “In addition to taxis and hotel shuttles, another frugal option is the city’s rapid bus transit system,” DeJulio says.
She offers up Kansas City’s Metro Area Express—or MAX—as an example.
“The fare is only \$1.50 each way,” she says. “You just can’t beat that.” **MFMA**

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