

# KEY CONFERENCE SOLUTIONS

## Conducting a thorough Site Inspection

Whether you use a venue finding company or do the research yourself, you still need to inspect your preferred venues. You will know your conference or meeting objectives, your attendee demographics, program design, meeting formats and social activity requirements.

Your venue site inspection will assess each venue on how it meets all of your requirements. Consideration needs to be given to not only the physical condition of the venue but also the logistics.

- Access to conference room
- Location of dining and accommodation
- Quality and standard of food and conference break refreshments
- Is it safe for delegates to walk around at night?
- Are the areas well lit.?
- Presentation of venue staff
- Flexibility in attitude of venue staff
- Will your group fit in the conference room with room to spare?
- Standard of conference room equipment
- Comfort of chairs.

One of the best ways to assess how the venue will meet your needs is to write out a list of all the things that are important to you and your group and score each one out of ten at each venue. At the start of each venue inspection you should advise the person who is showing you around that you will be taking notes.

Then you will have your personal experiences to consider in rating the venues and a score for each area of importance to your group's objectives. Remember to ask for at least 3 references of companies that have recently used the venue.

Choosing the right venue will impact on the outcome of your conference so you need to be thorough in your assessment.



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## Conferences Tips – The Planning Process

You've got the job of organising the next conference for your organisation. Whether it's your first time, or a regular part of your every day workload, you have to get it right.

The same principles apply, whether it's a conference for 400 or 24.

Achieving the best result with the least amount of stress requires working to a plan and sharing the important decision milestones with all the stakeholders as you move along. Building the right plan for your conference is the core element in achieving a successful outcome.

The key elements will be:

- Setting clear goals and objectives for the conference
- Venue selection
- Budgeting
- Managing the conference
- Financial management and your conference budget
- Review and feedback

You will need to understand the purpose of the conference. Start by asking do you really need to meet? Do you really need a conference?

Determining the purpose of your conference and writing clear goals and/or measurable educational objectives is the first step in planning the conference.

Even if you were not in on the decision to hold a conference you need to satisfy yourself that a conference or meeting is required and you clearly understand the objectives. Then you are in a position to give a comprehensive and consistent brief on your event including decision-making timelines when briefing your various service providers.



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## Conference Tips - Conference room configuration

For the communication to be effective, the style or configuration of the room will be dependant on the number of delegates and the preferred style of the presenter. But there are certain limitations to some of the room configurations.

To have open and active interaction between all delegates and the presenter Boardroom, U-shape and Clusters are the most commonly used or even just a circle of chairs with no desks. All are ideal for groups up to about 60. Above 60, the communication style changes because no matter what style of seating you use some delegates can no longer see or communicate with some of the other delegates. Now the communication is between the presenter and the delegates, with very little effective communication between delegates as a group. For groups over 60 Classroom, Theatre and Cluster configurations are the most common.

One of the hot topics of discussion from time to time in our office is the claims made by some venues on how many delegates they can seat in a specific conference room. One of the main considerations we look at, and so should you when conducting your site inspections, is to ensure there is enough room in the conference room you have been allocated to configure your delegate seating style with comfort. Seeing the room set up is great but sometimes you need to see if the venue can set up just a portion, like one table or mark out the floor where the tables and chairs will be placed. This will allow you to see that the room is not jammed up and delegates have easy access into and out of their seats at all times.

The sorts of seat available and how comfortable your delegates will be after 5 or 6 hours of sitting is critical. Fidgeting delegates are not good listeners or willing participants. Where possible avoid banquet chairs for conferences or meetings that go for more than an hour or two. Most conference centres and auditoriums have the appropriate seating but do check. In terms of surface top, I prefer a hard surface not clothed. Tablecloths on conference tables do offer modesty skirt protection if the conference table does not have that feature. You need to remember the conference room set up style you choose is based upon the communication needs of your group and your presenter.



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## Conference Tips - Chalk and Talk

We've come a long way from the blackboard/ white chalk presentations or have we?

Many still prefer to use an overhead projector rather than a laptop computer driven PowerPoint presentation. However for those who have moved to the latter option there is much to consider.

Using a computer or laptop requires a data projector to transfer the image up on to the screen. In data projectors a SVGA machine is ideal for PowerPoint presentations. For excel spreadsheets or web sites you'll need an XGA projector to achieve a sharp clean image.

Videos and DVD's can be played through either resolution projector with little noticeable difference in image quality. The projector should be of at least 1,000 lumens (brightness) for a 6x4 screen, the bigger the screen (in the same room situation) more lumens will be required.

Most venues have in-house or onsite audiovisual expertise that will coordinate with you in meeting the needs of your conference with current 'state of art' equipment.

Problems usually arise when guest speakers arrive with incompatible equipment of their own which takes a flurry of activity from the technical staff to address and then may not be usable.

It's imperative to keep in touch with all of your presenters and clarify their exact audiovisual needs and share those needs however simple with your conference audiovisual provider.



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## Conference Tips - How to assess your conference room

You've noticed the delegates moving around in their seats all morning and as you break for lunch it is brought to your attention by a couple of delegates that the room is not only cold but do we have to sit in these chairs all day!!

This situation can be avoided, when you assess the main conference room you will be using with great care and a comprehensive checklist.

### The main considerations are:

- Will the room handle with space to move about your group size in the configuration you wish to use?
- Is there plenty of room up the front for your presenters?
- Can everyone see the audiovisual screens and whiteboards?
- Are the chairs comfortable for the length of time your attendees are going to be sitting in them?
- How quickly and easily can attendees enter and exit the room?
- Where are the access doors located?
- How well lit is the room and are you able to dim the lights?
- Is the temperature of the room controllable and separately controlled from the rest of the building?
- Is the room affected by noise from outside the room?
- How well insulated for noise is the room?
- Does the room have natural light?
- Are there any distractions within the room or in the immediate vicinity?

In dedicated conference centres most items on this brief list should be well provided for. All the same, whether you are looking at a conference centre or hotel you need to be aware of the limitations of the particular room you will be using as not all the conference rooms have the same configuration or level of equipment.

Should you need to compromise on any issues remember that delegate comfort comes first and is not negotiable. There is no benefit in having your attendees offside from the beginning and the cause of the discomfort unfixable.



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## Conference Tips - Tips for Conferences Attendees

Attending a conference with other participants from your company or your industry opens up a world of opportunities for growth, learning and fellowship. Why not take a little time to plan ahead so that you can maximize the results from attending.

### **Set Goals Before You Go**

Before you leave for the conference, write down some goals that you want to accomplish during the conference. These could include items about specific skills you want to hone, questions you want to have answered, people you want to contact, areas for which you want to have referral contacts, etc

### **Dress Efficiently**

Hotels and conference often have great variations in temperature from room to room. So dress in layers that can be removed or added depending on the temperature. Wear clothes and shoes (low heels for women) that are comfortable.

### **Take Care of Your Body**

While the excitement of a conference can get the adrenaline flowing, be sure to monitor how your body is doing. Drink plenty of fluids, but remember that coffee and other caffeinated beverages often cause "dry mouth." Try to stay as close to your normal eating and drinking pattern as possible even though it may be tempting to over indulge the alcohol, sweets, and rich foods. It's no fun being sick at a conference. Also remember that many venues have exercise rooms and spa pools and saunas.

### **Maintain Balance**

With the excitement and over stimulation that usually occurs at conferences, it will be important for you to take measures to maintain your balance. Try to continue any routines that you normally practice at home. Arrange for a wake-up call or set an alarm to get up and take a morning walk/run. Bring your book of daily readings and your journal to the conference. Do a bit of yoga or other exercise in your room

### **Network, Network, Network**

A conference is a priceless opportunity to make yourself known and to get to know others. You've already set some goals that will get you started. Now be alert to other opportunities. Never underestimate the value of connecting with the "lesser known" participants -- it wasn't too many years ago that the keynote speaker was a "lesser known". Remember to listen to what others have to say, but you also have to offer something to the conversation if you want others to remember you. Don't make any commitments that you cannot keep, even though it is easy to get caught up in the high energy of the conference. We all know that what goes around comes around. So work hard at being helpful to others. Perhaps you can offer a kind word or a lead that might be useful.

### **Learn From Every Experience**

You will learn much from attending a conference. There will be wonderful speakers with much to share. You will learn a great deal as you network with colleagues. And there will be some mistakes you make that will also teach you important lessons. Learn from every single experience that you have.



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## Conference Tips – Your Accommodation

When assessing venues for a residential conference from the comfort of your office it's important that we are all clear in the definitions that the industry applies to describing accommodation rooms in the quotes they send to you. Although hotels, conference centres, guest houses and motels all have different in-house names they use to describe their rooms, the typical industry standards are:

**Single room**

a room for single occupancy, with one bed, normally a double

**Double room**

a room for two occupants sleeping in the same bed

**Twin room**

a room for two occupants sleeping in separate beds

**Executive**

larger double or twin room, with a sitting area

**Suite**

a room with a separate living/lounge area

**Shared facilities**

is where the bathroom is down the hall and shared with other guests

Making sure all delegates have the same standard of room can be important and asking for upgrades if available for the leader or presenter is common practice. Remember to ascertain from delegates their preference for smoking or non smoking rooms. Some venues are non-smoking throughout including accommodation rooms.

Closer to the event you will be asked to provide a rooming list with specific requirements noted (single, twin share, VIP etc). This will enable the venue to allocate bedrooms prior to your group arriving at the venue and ensure a smooth and swift registration for all your conference attendees.



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## Conference Tips – Help is at hand

Your workload is building already, it's only February and you've got the task of organising the conference along with everything else that needs to be done. Where to start? Achieving the best result with the least amount of stress and time requires working to a plan.

### The key elements to your plan are:

- Setting clear goals and objectives for the conference
- Venue selection
- Budgeting
- Managing the conference
- Review and feedback

Much time is spent in setting the conference goals and objectives, doing research on past experiences, venues used, verifying budgets etc. Then the task of finding the right venue, with room for your group, comparing costs etc can be very time consuming even for the most experienced. All of which can be a challenging and in the end an onerous time consuming responsibility.

You can save valuable time and money by using our free venue finding service. Independent professional advice on conference venues right across Australia from our experienced conference specialists here at Key Conference Solutions.

The team at Key Conference Solutions can also help you with all aspects of your conference from planning and venue selection, attendee registration, to advice on facilitators, team building, entertainment and travel requirements.

Take advantage of our free venue finding service by calling Sue Wall (03) 9870 4611



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## Conference Tips – Financial Planning

One of the first considerations is to determine if the conference is intended to make a profit or break even. If you are organising an internal staff or distributor conference, senior management may well have handed you a budget to work to.

It is essential to have financial control over the event and build a working budget. You need to clarify exactly what the budget is required to cover. As with all budgets you will have a list of fixed costs, which need to be covered irrespective of the number of delegates. For conferences, the broad areas are staging and production costs, the invitation process, function room deposits, audio visual needs, logistics and support fees.

Variable costs cover the rest because the number of delegates drives most of the variable cost. The number of attendees is therefore vital to know before you can arrive at a working budget. A CMP (Complete Meeting Package) usually refers to all charges per person, per 24 hours, including conference room, accommodation and all meals but excluding consumable items such as telephone, fax, photocopying and beverages.

A third unwritten but inevitable cost is a contingency budget to cover beverages, telephone, fax, photocopying and unforeseen logistical costs like courier or transport, expenses which will need to be covered as they arise.

Conferences are dynamic events and it is impossible to be absolutely accurate about contingency costs but you can generate a manageable budget in the early stages of the planning process, which makes it easier when you get to the venue selection process.



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## Conference Tips – Meeting Specifications or a Request for Proposal (RFP)

Preparing your meeting/conference specifications is a valuable process because it forces you to think about all the needs and resources your group will require to meet the objectives of their meeting or conference. Doing the research and documentation in a comprehensive way will save you valuable time in the long run. Irrespective of whether you are dealing directly with a venue or using the services of Key Conference Solutions it is beneficial to have documented all your known requirements including;

- Preferred dates
- Number of delegates, trainers and support staff attending
- Preferred geographic location
- Number of accommodation rooms and type (single/shared)
- Plenary room configuration (theatre, classroom etc.)
- Breakout rooms needed
- Times each meeting room required
- Audiovisual requirements
- Catering requirements (how many for which meals)
- Dietary Requirements
- Access for displays and products
- Your financial budget
- Car parking requirements
- On site activities needed ie Golf or outdoor team building activities
- Any related information such as VIP guests

Creating a document with as much of this information as possible will generate the basis upon which you can base your RFP. This will ensure that proposals you receive will be based on the same information and lead to you being able to accurately compare proposals received from venues. Key Conference Solutions offers a FREE venue finding service, call Sue Wall (03) 9870 4611



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## Conference Tips – Choosing a speaker

Charged with the responsibility of finding a speaker/facilitator for your business event - how do you know who is going to be suitable for your meeting or conference. Here are some useful hints to help in your search.

If you have previously had a speaker that you liked, use him or her as a resource to refer you to someone who will be a good fit for you. Seek recommendations from within your company and Industry Associations.

Consider your reasons for having a speaker or facilitator. Is it to attract more people to the meeting? Is it to motivate the sales team to sell harder? Is it to bring information that the audience could not get elsewhere? Or is it to start the meeting off with a bang so that everyone is switched on for the working sessions.

Communicate your needs clearly. A common error made in choosing a speaker is not being clear about your expectations and needs. Prepare a brief, which can be sent out. Some people feel nervous about giving instructions to a celebrity, but whether you are paying \$1,000 or \$10,000, the speaker is there to meet your objectives. The clearer you are about what you expect, who is in the audience, what has happened at previous events, the easier it will be for the speaker to be on the money and do a good job.

Educate your speaker. Don't assume he or she knows all about your organisation and industry. Send information about your company, no matter how well known it is. Too much background is better than not enough. Make sure you provide that person with enough information about the company to help him or her be successful. They need to know about your company, your key players, and your businesses.

Treat the speaker like an attendee. Make sure your speakers get all the relevant information the attendees do, so they know who else is speaking and the schedule of events.

Do your homework and check them out, make sure you check their credentials and their previous clients for references, you need to avoid any surprises.

Clearly understand what is and is not covered in the fee arrangement such as travel costs, overnight accommodation, meals etc for the speaker. The last thing you need is an unexpected fee dispute after the event.



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## Conference Tips – Debrief and Review

As an integral part of the conference or meeting planning process is the need to find out what elements were successful and what areas need improvement. The people to ask are your conference presenters and of course the delegates. Remember, rarely will you be able to please all your delegates, all of the time and the feedback you receive will help you for next time.

You have a choice of when to get the answers you need:

- at the event;
- after the event, by mail;
- after the event, by telephone;
- by group discussion or individual interview

How you go about getting feedback varies, some favour a pre-printed questionnaire, which delegates complete as the event is in progress. If you are researching speaker style and content this is ok. You do need to be aware that an overall view of the event will be impossible to gauge until the event is completed.

Distributing questionnaires to delegates as they leave the conference is another option. Using this method, the replies reviewed may be more considered – the delegates will have had time to think about the event in its entirety and be able to make better overall judgements. The number of returned questionnaires is likely to be quite low and so the results may not be representative.

A better method is to follow up a statistically relevant sample by telephone within a couple of days of the conference. Say 25% of groups up to 100 and on a sliding scale about 10% of groups over 500 or more. If anonymity is guaranteed you will get a more honest view.

Remember the prime conference objective in assessing the success or otherwise of your conference and keep the smaller itchy issues in perspective.

The main outcome of conducting relevant and focused feedback is to discover opportunities that will assist in improving future events.



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## Conference Tips – Making your conference interesting

The same people generally attend the same events year in year out and you as an organiser have to scale that wall of expectation and possibly cynicism. Delegates already know what to expect don't they? It will be the same as last year, sitting in a classroom environment and being talked at! Death by overhead! No wonder they look sleepy, doodle and switch off. Remember on average your delegates will only take on board maybe 3 key facts from your day in spite of all your hard work! Here are some suggestions to put some interest in your next event.

Have an explosive start - pyrotechnics, loud music and laser light shows can add a huge dimension to the start of an event and really make the audience sit up and listen

### **Make it interactive**

How about making it less of a conference and more of a quiz show format. This allows participation from the audience and can be a simple quiz style right up to a simulated TV show environment. Create a debate, perhaps with some humour, where the audience is allowed to barrack and disagree with the presenters? If its good enough for TV why not for your conference if only for one session!

### **Team Building**

If you are getting the sales team or whole company together then it may be an ideal time to break the meeting with a hands on activity perhaps a team building exercise or more structured business games. Most of these take about 2 hours and ideally fit into a full days program.

### **Celebrity Speakers**

Many sports stars as well as captains of industry can provide that spark of motivation as well as humour to what otherwise is a hard days grind.

### **Ice Breakers**

Simple 10 minute exercises that can be done at tables from juggling to making a giraffe out of newspaper. There are dozens of such games that can be done at little or no cost

### **Seating**

Why not try a different room layout like cabaret style or go really radical and use beanbags or deckchairs!

Our team at Key Conference Solutions can introduce you to the right professionals who can put some interest and wow into your next business event. Call us (03) 9870 4611.



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## Conference Tips –Tips when attending an external conference

### **1. Remove Yourself From Office Pressures.**

Let your work place function without you. If you must stay in touch, then check in at a set time—perhaps during your lunch break. Try to remove yourself as much as possible from “work”, your email and your mobile phone.

### **2. Arrive at The Seminar Site Early.**

Arriving early familiarizes you with the venue and your surrounds. Gets you in the mood for learning and prevents the stress of rushing in.

### **3. Introduce Yourself.**

You obviously have something in common with your fellow attendees since you're all at the same event. Break the ice and say hello.

### **4. Bring Business Cards.**

Seminars and programs are great places for networking. Have your business cards ready for those people you meet.

### **5. Take Notes.**

It will help your comprehension to write down notes. Write down questions, too, as they pop up, so you'll remember to ask them later

### **6. Participate in Discussion.**

By doing so, you'll remember more of the material. Do you have a suggestion? Did you have a problem that you're solved? Share that information so others can learn from your experience.

### **7. Don't Hesitate to Ask Questions.**

Chances are if you have question or something isn't clear, you're not the only one puzzled.

### **8. Keep an "Actions Items" List.**

Throughout the seminar jot down ideas you can implement immediately when you return to the office. Share the ideas and your notes with your coworkers.

### **10. Extend the Learning.**

What can you do to reinforce what you learned in the seminar? Obtain a book on the subject? Refer regularly to your notes? Begin a discussion group on the subject with your colleagues? Consider ways in which you can keep the educational spirit of the program alive.



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## Conference Tips - Contracts and Mutual Agreements

Venues have a variety of names for what is essentially a performance contract between the venue and the organisation (client) holding an event. The contract spells out the terms and conditions under which your booking is accepted and what penalties if any apply if your event varies to the agreed dates and delegate numbers as specified in the contract.

The purpose of the contract is two fold - firstly it confirms the specifics of your booking in regard to arrival / departure, delegate numbers, food and beverage requirements, accommodation rooms, conference requirements and charges that apply to the provision of these services. Secondly the contract asks that you in fact turn up on the day and know what the costs will be and ensures your chosen venue is all set to go when you arrive.

When you receive your contract it is essential that you read it carefully and fully understand its content before you sign it. Normally to secure your booking you will need to pay the nominated deposit and return a signed copy of the contract. The deposit required will vary from venue to venue ranging up from 25% to some requiring 100% payment before your arrival. It is important to be aware of the critical variation/ cancellation notification periods.

Most contracts have wash down or release dates 90/60/30 days prior to arrival for contracted accommodation rooms. This may allow you to release back to the venue accommodation rooms not required without penalty. Late cancellation can be an issue for venues as they can find it difficult to replace lost revenue with new business on short notice and therefore rely on their cancellation fees to maintain room revenue.

Cancellation fees are normally applied when the contracted dates and/or delegate numbers are not met. A change of dates is usually viewed as a cancellation of the first date and a new booking for the new date and a new contract issued.

In certain circumstances terms and conditions can be varied before signing the contract and is generally done to meet specific needs and to the benefit of both parties. The contract/mutual agreement between you and the venue places a responsibility on your chosen venue to hold the conference space and accommodation rooms etc for your group and for you to arrive on the right day with the agreed numbers. A win/win agreement for both parties with no hidden surprises.



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