

That's the Spot

**SIX PROS SHARE
THEIR SECRETS TO
CHOOSING VENUES.**

By Carolee Noury



NO MATTER WHAT TYPE OF EVENT YOU'RE PLANNING, VENUE SELECTION IS ONE OF THE FIRST BOXES YOU HAVE TO CHECK OFF YOUR TO-DO LIST. THAT EMPTY BOX CAN FEEL LIKE A CONTINENT, WHICH MAKES MARKING IT "DONE" ESPECIALLY REWARDING. TO SHRINK IT DOWN TO ISLET SIZE, SIX NEW JERSEY-BASED EXPERTS—THREE EVENT PROFESSIONALS AND THREE VENUE INSIDERS—OFFER THEIR EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

RESEARCH & REVIEWS

After an exhaustive Internet search and some note comparing with your network, the options may still feel limitless. Doreen Heluk, facilities manager for Lam Cloud, recommends two specialized websites; [partyspace.com](#) and [eventective.com](#) are popular with the event planners she collaborates with. Most event sites offer a search function with links to venues and/or pictures of the spaces. Tom Casella, general manager of Nanina's in the Park, recommends a direct visit to the venue's website. On the Nanina's site, photo galleries and videos give you an intimate look at the setting before you clock a single mile.

Social media is another great resource. Reviewers offer inside views into less obvious pros and cons for facilities. Maryellen Blette,

director of meetings and events for Ultramar Travel, includes reviews in her evaluation of potential sites: "Sometimes they give us interesting feedback we take into account." The venue is beautiful, but the food blah? Is the end-of-day staff less helpful? Reviews from past guests offer information beyond the sales team. And if the venue is a keeper, make sure you let them know. If you depend on reviews to help make your decision, make sure to leave your own. But before submitting a review, try to resolve any issues directly with the venue. "Never, ever burn bridges," says Blette. After all, response to negative feedback can separate the okay businesses from the stellar.

A visit to the venue is vital. While there, experience the ambiance firsthand. "I try to imagine what it will look like the day of the

event," says Mallory Rapisarda, owner and event coordinator for MCR Event Planning and Design, "starting the moment I pull into the site to the final view from my rearview mirror. Keep in mind the details of your meeting. If the space is small and you're holding a cocktail party, will guests be forced to juggle their plates and drinks? I like to make sure all guests will be comfortable and enjoy themselves."

If the lovely conference center at the top of your list borders a rundown plaza, you'll be glad to know before you've signed on the dotted line. "Understanding the layout of the venue is critical," says Jessica Porch, assistant director of conference and event services at Rowan University, "especially if you have a clear vision of how you want your event to look and feel."

THE PROS *sound off*

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WHO IS THE TEAM?

During the first walk through, after you've covered the basics, like cleanliness and staff professionalism, follow your instincts. Does the venue feel right? Will your client fit in here? Can the venue staff answer your questions adequately? Will you look forward to working with them? It's all important, but especially the interpersonal aspect. Event planners and venue experts agree: The staff can make your job much easier or, possibly, induce migraines. Mark Zettler, president of Life O' The Party, LLC, says it comes down to one question, "How easy is it to work with the staff? Ideally, they will be friendly, reliable and flexible." Heluk agrees. With her experienced and reliable staff, she knows any issues that arise during the event will be addressed efficiently, because "it isn't really a problem unless our guests notice." She takes confidence in her venue's ability to keep guests' attention on their events. Confirmation that her team has done what they set out to do comes in the form of guests who approach her about holding their own events at Lam Cloud.

ASK & YOU SHALL RECEIVE

How do you determine if the staff will be the stellar team you hope for? Ask questions. When you get answers, get the important details in writing. Remember, in particular, to pay attention to extra fees that will be added to the client's bill. Zettler says planners should "make sure to get the schedule of costs. Make sure you read it. Ask your craziest questions and get used to saying, "That sounds great. Will you please send that to me in an email?"

Have a single point person, Rapisarda recommends. Invest in that relationship because you'll want it to be reciprocal, especially on the day of the event when things need to get done. "It will make your job easier," Rapisarda says. And who doesn't want that?

The same is true of event planners. Casella says that the most satisfied clients have a positive connection to both his team and their planner. This is crucial during the event

because you have to have people who are willing to do whatever it takes. As Porch says, “You just do it, no questions asked. There’s no time to worry about the situation; you find a solution and execute it. Reflection can happen later.” The sign that she’s been successful is the look of relief on the organizer’s face once the event is over. That one look could be the difference between someone who becomes a regular and someone you never see again.

Another tip is to be mindful of businesses’ images and their competitors. How do your rivals factor into an event? Blette learned that lesson through an unfortunate clash. “I booked an event for a pharmaceutical company in the same hotel at the same time as another’s,” she remembers. “My client was upset and despite the many years since, it’s become one of those questions I always ask.” Educated questions will save you time and extra stress. “Make sure you cover all your bases,” says Zettler. “Know every detail, even the seemingly small ones because these form the questions you’ll need to ask. When is the earliest you can be in the venue setting up? Don’t operate under assumptions. Voice your expectations and make sure you get a definite answer.”

THE EXTRAS

Get to know what options are available in your search. Rowan University offers many facilities where events can be held. “It allows me to present clients with options they aren’t likely to find in a single venue,” says Porch. Lam Cloud is a true technology campus. That means, among other things, it offers “lightning fast” wireless connectivity, audio-visual equipment for seamless presentations and even special effects. “We are power independent,” Heluk says. “No matter what’s happening around us, we’ll have electricity for your event.”

Nanina’s in the Park offers more than stunning settings. Recently, the company upgraded its wireless capabilities and audio-visual options. Head chef Vincenzo Loretto is another bragging point for the venue. A third-generation chef in a family rumored to have fed European royalty, Loretto is best known for his

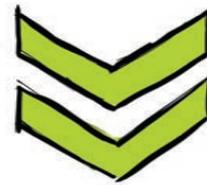
pasta sauce which is sold at hundreds of retail locations. And you won’t find him hiding in the kitchen. “Vincenzo is at all event cocktail hours, cooking at either a scampi or pasta station,” says Casella. “He values spending time with our guests.” But also beware that some extras could strain your budget, says Zettler. “The more options a place offers, and the more they cater toward the customer’s needs, the more likely you’ll be facing extra charges,” he says. “This is especially true for hotels and convention centers. They’ll be able to make things much easier and smoother, but your client will need to understand the trade-off.”

ALWAYS BE OVER-PREPARED

Planners and venue staff agree on another rule: have extra. Extra supplies, extra hands, extra preparation. One of Heluk’s mottos is, “inspect what you expect.” Part of her success is her attention to detail. She accomplishes everything she can before the event to allow her to focus on ensuring it runs smoothly. While working with your venue, make sure you ask related questions: How many staff people will be available to help? Is there extra help if needed? What sort of extras will be on hand for the event? Suggestions include: linens, tables, extension cords and tools. Zettler recommends that organizers know how to get to the nearest hardware store: “Have more than you could possibly need. Extras of your extras, but also have that backup plan. Know how to get what you need.”

If your event feels a bit like a puzzle, then “several of the pieces are the venue,” Zettler says. “You have to make sure they fit together and you also have to be prepared for when the puzzle changes on you. Learn the changes and then adapt to keep it all together. If the venue is too much of a puzzle, you’ll know not to use it again.”

If venue selection still feels intimidating, don’t worry. Even with careful preparations the unexpected can happen, the pros say. And each time, they deal with it and come back stronger. As Oscar Wilde once said, “Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.”



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