

Event Planners: 10 Essential Questions to Ask Your Venue about Technology

Technology is an ever more critical component of today's events. It is no longer just a microphone, spotlight and company logo. Today's guests expect a more immersive experience with the addition of webcasting and live streaming, projection mapping and personal iPads, intelligent lighting and video walls, even recording and post-production for social media and websites. It has even worked its way into new areas such as event marketing and guest registration.

Is your venue up to today's technology task? Whether it is or not, knowing ahead of time answers to these questions is necessary for budgeting, keeping the planning process flowing smoothly and saving you money (and stress). Whether your venue is an event space or hotel, retail store or art gallery, restaurant or club, here are the must ask questions now – to avoid your worst nightmare later.

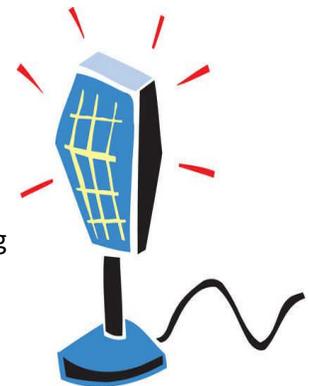
1. **WHEN DO WE HAVE ACCESS TO THE SPACE?** You know that the more complex the production, the more time needed onsite for



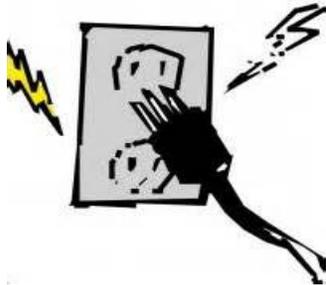
setup and preparation. For the 6 PM cocktail event, getting in early enough usually doesn't present a problem – unless your venue has booked another event for that afternoon. By the same token, if you are running a complex program with multiple projectors, several performances, and sophisticated video and lighting, you may need two full days or more for rigging, technical setup, testing, rehearsals, programming changes, etc. Before you sign the contract, it is best to have some idea of how much time you will need for pre-event production and make sure it is available, or you may get hit with double or triple the rental you had in your initial budget – or worse, find the space is not available.

2. **WHAT EQUIPMENT DO YOU PROVIDE?** In-house AV has an all-in-one-package advantage plus its technicians know the space. But it can also have drawbacks: a captive audience may mean a higher price tag (whether equipment cost is a separate line item or included in the rental), options may be fixed and everything you need may not be available or

where you need it – for example, a PA but no DJ gear. (A house system designed for background music is generally not suitable for DJs.) For large events with significant AV needs, savvy event planners are negotiating open sourcing into their contracts to give them the flexibility of bringing in their own suppliers, if they should so choose. But, beware the fine print and make sure you are not on the hook for paying extra fees if you bypass the venue or its exclusive vendor. A final suggestion: don't forget the extras such as pipe and drape, risers, radios and backstage communications, spotlights, podiums, etc.



3. WHAT IS YOUR POWER SUPPLY? The surest road to event disaster is to plug a coffee pot into an over-loaded lighting circuit.

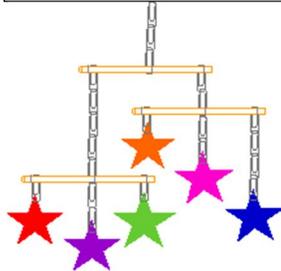


Having plenty of wall outlets is not enough: it is the number of *circuits* that the outlets are tied into that matter. Audio, video, lighting, the kitchen – they should preferably each have their own separate power supply – i.e., dedicated 20 Amp circuits. If you are bringing in significant lighting, multiple high-powered projectors or a Grateful Dead-like wall of sound, or your event is in an old building that has not been rewired for today’s electrical needs, you may need to tap into the venue’s main power supply. This calls for special equipment and often requires a licensed electrician – costs you will need to factor into your budget. Be sure to ask if the venue will provide the engineer to tap into the main power or if you will need to bring in your own.

4. DO YOU PROVIDE DEDICATED WI-FI? From webcasting to live streaming on social media, for smart-phones and personal tablets, even guest registration apps – our on-demand, hyper-connected world has transformed Wi-Fi from a free amenity to costly necessity. Therefore, it is important to consider Wi-Fi early in your budget planning with these three questions: connectivity, capacity and cost. When evaluating your needs, keep in mind that Wi-Fi is scalable to the size and needs of your event: how many guests, how many devices and how much content will be streamed will all influence what you need – and what you will pay. Just having Wi-Fi is not enough: capacity is important. DSL or a system that runs the venue’s in-house operations is not likely to be robust enough. At the same, a venue that provides dedicated event Wi-Fi will be looking to recoup the cost of this investment, so fees may start to add up. As with AV, it pays to negotiate open sourcing, and do so early to maximize your leverage. This will to give you the time and flexibility to shop for a cost-effective provider.



Tip: Bringing in your own Wi-Fi hotspot is one way to get around the high fees some hotels and other venues charge for Wi-Fi. Though the F.C.C. ruled that blocking hot spots was illegal, many in the hospitality industry are fighting the ruling. So, in addition to asking about cost, find out if the venue will block your hot spot signal.



5. CAN WE HANG EQUIPMENT FROM THE CEILING? To hang or not to hang: the answer may have significant consequences for your audio, video and lighting layout and setup. Video projectors, lighting, audio loudspeakers – it is often necessary to hang some or all of these from the ceiling. If there are ceiling beams or lighting bars, be sure to check that weight restrictions will accommodate your equipment. A multi-projector setup or the need to hang large loudspeakers may require a rigging specialist. There are also hanging kits that include a

platform, but these may require some patchwork and painting after the event. The alternative is trussing or, for video, rear projection (if there is space).



6. WHAT ARE THE BUILDING'S INSURANCE REQUIREMENTS? Most buildings in New York City, for example, require subcontractors to carry a \$5 million umbrella policy. This is often prohibitively expensive for small vendors such as photographers, florists, some catering companies and other specialty providers. However, the good news is that most buildings are flexible and will accept lower limits for these smaller firms, provided they have some coverage. But don't assume. A call to the building's risk management department up front can save you time and headache later on. Make sure you send a copy of the building's Certificate of Liability ("COI") form to all your vendors early in the planning process.

7. CAN WE USE TAPE? Some venues won't allow *any* tape, even gaff tape which is designed to protect surface finishes. This is especially the case if the floor or walls have been redone recently. Knowing ahead of time whether or not you can use tape can save you time and headache in laying out your production. Gaff tape also comes in a variety of colors, giving you more options to match backgrounds. But don't wait until the last minute as special requests sometimes need to be special ordered.



8. WHAT ARE YOUR SECURITY REQUIREMENTS? This is not an issue buildings take lightly – for your protection as well as theirs. Find out if the building requires the names of your staff, suppliers and volunteers. If so, inform everyone on your team to come prepared with photo ID. If badges need to be worn on-site, it is good idea to keep on hand a supply of lanyards or plastic clips since stick-on badges often fall off and get lost. Assigning dedicated security personnel makes the process run smoothly and gives you a point person to troubleshoot problems that may arise on-site. Also check if vehicles must be pre-registered.

Tip: For a complex production, hiring a technical director to manage all your needs before and during your program can be a wise investment. In addition to ensuring that planning and production flow smoothly, it can pay for itself out of time and effort saved while some of cost may be covered in the equipment rentals (i.e., trade discounts offered between suppliers).

9. **WHAT ARE YOUR LOAD-IN FACILITIES?** Does your venue have a separate load-in entrance and or freight elevator and what are the hours of operation? If your 10th floor event ends at 10:00 PM, but the freight elevator closes at 5:00 PM, you can be looking at leaving valuable equipment overnight, trudging down stairs or paying overtime for extended operation. An experienced event planner also knows to check the facilities in person: a visual inspection will tell if elevators or loading docks can easily get backed up and, if so, the need to stage load-in times. Again, appointing a point person to handle load-in (along with security) bottlenecks will free you up to handle more pressing setup concerns.



10. **DO YOU PROVIDE STORAGE SPACE?** Whether it is audio-visual-lighting road cases, catering racks, packing boxes, floral containers or just personal affects, everyone needs storage space – and it seems there is never enough. Having sufficient space keeps the event space clear, saves time, and makes the setup process flow more efficiently by reducing logjams at the elevator and load-in entrance. Even knowing it is not available puts everyone on notice to economize in their packing and come prepared to take excess items and equipment back to their trucks. If equipment is to be stored overnight, don't forget to ask about security.

A final suggestion: technology has its own language and information frequently needs to flow in real time. If bringing in your own tech team, allowing them to communicate directly with the venue's technology personnel and engineering staff will reduce the risk that something important will get lost in translation or, worse, fall through the cracks.

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Sine AV Design, Inc., based New York City, is an event technology specialist serving the art, fashion, media, not for profit and corporate communities. We provide production management, audio/visual/lighting systems and technical support. For venues, we offer systems design, management and maintenance services. We're providing this free help because we want to be your go-to team for all your event technology solutions!

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