

Combustible Cocktail :

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Attendees want alcohol at their meetings, but the potential for trouble is high. How can planners handle a mix as explosive as meetings and liquor?

It seemed like a good idea at the time

For years, officials at the Milwaukee Art Museum had been renting space to groups for special events — many of them including food and drink — without any problems. Why would a corporate event put on by Clear Channel Radio be any different?

But by the time the February 2006 affair — Martinifest, as it was called — had ended, it had turned into a bacchanal. Attendees got rowdier and more drunk as the night went on, covering art works with food, alcohol, and, in some cases, vomit. At one point, four men were seen climbing onto — and groping — the breasts of “Standing Woman,” a sculpture by early 20th-century American artist Gaston Lachaise. After the event, two pieces of art were pulled out of the museum to determine if they had been damaged.

How could things have gone so wrong? For one, Clear Channel had apparently agreed that no more than 1,500 people would attend the event, but actual attendance approached 1,900. But the major culprit was alcohol — freely available for a \$30 admission charge — which was in plentiful supply, while food was not.

Part of the Culture

As the above example demonstrates, if precautions are not taken, alcohol and meetings can be a combustible mix. But unless a company is going to go the route of Wal-Mart and ban alcohol at all of its corporate events, planners have to learn what safeguards to take.

Michelle Gothan, senior marketing coordinator for Early Warning Services LLC of Scottsdale, Ariz., has seen both sides of the issue. Before joining Early Warning Services, she worked for a company in the swimming pool industry whose owner was adamantly opposed to including alcohol at business events.

“I was with him for 10 years and tried to convince him that he needed to serve alcohol,” she says. “I couldn’t do it.” So she would pull out all the stops to try to get people to come to a no-alcohol event — and they just wouldn’t come.

“If someone goes out of town on a business trip and decides to invest his time in attending an event, where is he most likely to go? One where he can drink alcohol, or one where he can drink iced tea and water?” In fact, she says, some of the [attendees] “were really fuming. I mean, I heard about it.”

Now that she is planning events with alcohol, she faces a new set of challenges. “Sometimes I feel like a kindergarten teacher,” she says, whether it’s laying out the ground rules for an event or keeping an eye on attendees whom she suspects might imbibe a bit too much.

Protect and Defend

If you’re going to hold an event at which you serve alcohol, you’d better make sure that you research it, warns Arlene Sheff, CMP, a senior meeting and event planner for the Boeing Co. in Seal Beach, Calif.

What’s the history of this event? Is it being held in the same location? Did anyone get drunk in the past? These are some of the questions that she suggests asking.

Planners also need to know their groups. "If it's a business event involving your own employees, they're probably going to be pretty good about watching their behavior because their bosses are there. But if attendees are from outside the company, their behavior might be different."

Whatever the situation, it's important to have a game plan. Make sure that bartenders are TIPS (Training for Intervention Procedures) trained. Have teams of staffers walk around during the event to monitor alcohol consumption and behavior.

"And plan for inebriation," Sheff says. "It's worth the money to book hotel rooms in advance ... so that you can keep a drunk attendee off the road."

In the end, a meeting planner needs to know that in planning an event, she did everything possible to be safe. "Ask yourself this," she says. "If you get put on the stand in a courtroom, what are you going to say you did to protect the employee, the attendee, and your company?"

For example, several years ago, a deputy for the Philips County Sheriff's Department in Montana accompanied his supervisor to a law enforcement conference. An event sponsor provided attendees with a hospitality suite, which was used on the first night as the venue in which law enforcement officers and vendors could get together to discuss business. Food and drink were both freely available in the suite.

The hospitality suite was closed down shortly before midnight, but the Philips County deputy, along with four other attendees, acquired a key to the suite, re-entered it, and began playing drinking games. When they left the suite a second time, the deputy headed for his own room, which he had to reach by crossing a hallway that was open on one side to the hotel's atrium. He never made it, falling over a railing into the hotel's inner courtyard. He later died.

The deputy's widow filed a worker's compensation claim against the sheriff's department. The Montana Supreme Court eventually upheld that claim, ruling that the deputy attended the conference — and visited the hospitality room — for the benefit of his employer, and that the hours of drinking before he re-entered the hospitality suite a second time surely contributed to the fall that led to his death. Consequently, the court ruled, the deputy was acting within the scope of his employment up until the time he fell.

To Serve or Not to Serve

The liability issues associated with serving alcohol are complex and can vary from state to state. But there does appear to be one foolproof way of avoiding liability: Don't serve someone who shouldn't be served.

"Don't be reluctant to empower servers (assuming that service is by hotel or caterer staff) to refuse service where an attendee appears to have had too much to drink," says James Goldberg, a *Corporate Meetings & Incentives* columnist and principal in the Washington, D.C., law firm of Goldberg & Associates PLLC, when asked what he would suggest if a meeting planner asked for one piece of advice regarding alcohol service.

Easier said than done? Perhaps. But Sheff agrees that it's a critical point. "Always hire a bartender, even in a hospitality suite," she says. "And make sure that your bartender never serves anyone who appears to be intoxicated."

One Safe Solution

Of course, one way to avoid the inebriation problem is to keep employees from getting drunk in the first place. One Ontario, Canada-based company offers a product that gives attendees of corporate events the opportunity to track their blood alcohol levels during an event.

Using its Blood Alcohol Quotient software, Ladybug Teknologies Inc. of Cambridge, Ontario, can help attendees to make informed decisions about when they have had enough to drink.

When hired for an event, Ladybug personnel will set up breath stations, the quantity depending on the number of attendees. Each attendee is given a mouthpiece that they can use to blow into a Breathalyzer.

Attendees can go to the breath stations "at will," says Ladybug CEO Sherry Colbourne. "There's no pressure and no judgment." Every time the attendee uses the station, the BAQ software records the time and corresponding blood alcohol level so that the attendee has a complete picture of how that blood alcohol level changes over time.

Colbourne says that every time the attendee goes to the station, he is asked to estimate his blood alcohol level — and invariably underestimates it. “People are stunned to see how poorly they judge their level of impairment,” Colbourne says. “And they’re usually shocked to see how high their blood alcohol level is after one or two drinks.”

Gabrielle Clermont of Dandy Productions, Guelph, Ontario, uses Ladybug for her corporate events and finds that it not only serves an educational service, but also provides some entertainment value.

“I had one event with about 300 attendees,” she says. “About five didn’t participate. Everyone was curious to see what it was all about.”

Most of her corporate clients use the service for their events. “I have one client who, because they are offering an open bar, is requiring attendees to use the service,” Clermont says. “As people come into the venue, they’ll get a drink bracelet and give us their car keys. When they want to leave, they’ll have to visit Ladybug. If their blood alcohol level is under 0.04, then they will get their keys back.”

10-Step Program

Arlene Sheff, CMP, a senior meeting and event planner for Boeing Co., Seal Beach, Calif., suggests that planners take these 10 steps when serving alcoholic beverages:

1. Provide pre-meeting information outlining **guidelines for drinking** responsibly.
2. Serve **only beer and wine**.
3. Provide **sufficient food** (avoid salty snacks) and complimentary nonalcoholic beverages.
4. Provide **drink tickets** to control consumption.
5. Include a **dual indemnification clause** in your contract.
6. **Instruct bartenders** not to serve anyone who appears to be intoxicated.
7. Never allow people to serve themselves. **Always hire a bartender**, even in hospitality suites.
8. **Cut 15 minutes off** your cocktail party — no one will notice, and you’ll save money.
9. Close bars before the end of the event. **Do not announce a ‘last call.’**
10. As a precaution, **pre-arrange taxi service and hotel accommodations**.

Serving Tips from Lawyer James Goldberg

- Consider using a **distinctive name badge** for any attendee who is under 21.
- Be sure that the contract requires the venue or caterer to comply with all alcohol service laws, such as not serving minors or anyone who appears to be intoxicated. Emphasize to the venue or caterer that they have an **obligation not to over-serve anyone**.
- Consider a contractual requirement that **all alcohol servers complete liability training**. Some states mandate such training.
- If you observe an intoxicated attendee, you have just **assumed “ownership”** of the problem (and thus potential liability). Come up with an alternative to letting the individual drive.

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