

Trim the fat from your meeting budget

Everyone wants to get the most for their money, and nonprofit event planners and meeting managers are no different. Whether you're organizing a gala for thousands or an offsite board meeting for a handful, the following tips can help you stretch your budget as you work with venues, caterers and other suppliers.

Make smart meal choices: Buffets, such as carving or pasta stations, often are less expensive to staff than individually served meals. Boxed lunches are an even more budget-conscious choice, though they're inappropriate for more formal events.

Boot the bottle: When providing refreshments, skip the bottled water and offer pitchers of good old tap water. It's cheaper and more environmentally friendly.

Reduce AV use: Encouraging speakers to ditch PowerPoint® and fancy videos will minimize the costs associated with using projectors, screens and other AV equipment at your meeting venue. Or consolidate those who need AV into one room, or onto one day of the agenda. If you can, bring your own portable projector. And before you rent wireless microphones, consider just how much traveling around the room your speakers will be doing and if they're really necessary.

Negotiate contract items: Consider every line item of a contract to be open to negotiation. You won't win every battle, but few venues or vendors have the heart to say "no" to every request. Seeking bids from more than one vendor gives you leverage, so consider several. And if an event, like a quarterly board meeting, is held regularly, consider using the same vendor and requesting volume pricing.

Avoid overtime: If your event requires extensive setup, arrange schedules so that staffers (yours and the venue's) work during normal business hours and don't incur overtime.

These are just a few suggestions. Keep an open mind and you can find many ways to defray the costs of a meeting or event without diminishing the participants' experience. In a climate where every penny counts, it pays to pinch them.