

HOW TO SAVE ON CONFERENCE AV WITHOUT COMPROMISING QUALITY

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Introduction

I often hear it said in the AV industry that you get what you pay for. Whilst there's some truth to that there's plenty of exceptions. For example if you negotiate a better deal on hire of a particular piece of equipment, does that mean it's somehow not as good? Of course not, it's the same piece of equipment. The same applies if you shop around and find a better deal somewhere else for that same equipment. The purpose of this report is to look at creative ways to save money without sacrificing quality. The first part of this report looks at saving money whilst the second part looks at low or no cost techniques to ensure you get a great result.

Saving on Conference AV

Shop around

Any guide about saving money would be incomplete if it didn't have this age old advice - shop around! Don't just get one quote. Get two or three. That brings us to the next point...

Don't Assume You Have to Use the In-House Provider

Using an in-house or venue preferred AV provider can be convenient but it may come at considerable cost. Some in-house AV companies pay the venue a percentage of their fee or where the venue contracts the AV provider, they may charge a percentage on top for managing the process. Some venues require you to use their provider however many do not. Do check if they charge a fee for using an outside provider. If you can use an outsider provider then shop around.

Get a Detailed Quote

The more detail you have on a quote the easier it is to see where the costs are going. With a detailed quote you might be able to identify costly items that you can save on.

Piggyback on a Prior or Post Event

Find out if there's another event happening in the same room the day before or after your event. You may be able to use the same equipment. A large part of the work in providing AV is in delivering, setting up and packing up. If the equipment can be left in place it's a very attractive proposition to the AV provider and they may give a discount. You could ask the venue who the AV provider is or contact the organisation that's running the event. You may be able to get a decent discount.

Multi Event Discount

If you're running multiple events, you may be able to get a quantity discount if you offer several events to the AV provider. It's not just about the quantity of work but it is much easier for a provider to work with an event they are familiar with and can provide a standard setup multiple times rather than having to customise it for different customers. My company does work for a charity that does six large events around the state each year. Do I give them a good price? Yes indeed. I am happy for the quantity of work but also I know exactly what they need in advance and how to set it up. It saves a lot of time.

Can You Staff Some of the Roles?

If you are going to have some of your own staff at the event you may be able to use them for some of the AV roles rather than paying the AV provider. Some roles are quite technical and this may not work but other roles are simpler. For example running the PowerPoint presentations might be something you can staff yourself. I would suggest generally having at least one technician on hand just in case something goes wrong.

Is There Equipment you can Supply Yourself?

Some smaller items can be cheaper to supply yourself. This might include:

- Whiteboards (cheap to buy just tricky to transport)
- Flip charts
- Laptops
- Small projectors for breakout rooms

Venue Freebies

Ask what your venue can include in your room hire or at minimal cost. This might include items like lecterns, whiteboards, flip charts and even staging. Some of these items are awkward for an external AV provider to transport but easy for the venue if they have them on-site already.

Appropriate Equipment

Make sure that you are only getting the equipment you really need. The first thing that comes to mind is wireless microphones. A decent hand held wireless microphone is anywhere from \$70 to \$100 per day to hire plus setup & labour. The exact same cabled microphone version is usually between \$10 to \$20 per day with minimal labour. It is worth asking if you really need a wireless microphone. If your presenter is moving around then yes, if you need an audience Q&A microphone then yes. If your presenter is simply standing at a lectern the whole time then you may well be able to use a cabled microphone instead. I'm surprised how often I see a wireless microphone simply sitting on a stand in front of a lectern for the whole event. Many assume you need wireless microphones to run a panel discussion. This isn't always so. Desk or floor mounted gooseneck microphones can be an affordable alternative that can work very well. Another thing is projector screens. Projectors have a lot more power these days so for your breakout rooms in particular you may avoid using a screen by projecting on to a white or light coloured wall.

Provide a Budget Up Front

If you have a good idea of cost or you know from a previous event then give the AV provider your budget up front and ask if they can fit their quote within that.

This is a negotiating technique called "anchoring". It sets your expectation up front. You will often find that suppliers will do their best to come up with a quote that fits.

Don't Re-Invent the Wheel for Every Event

If you've run the same event once before, you've had a great education on what works. Don't let all that work go to waste. Prepare a folder with all the relevant information including supplier names, quotes etc. When you run the event next time it will make things easier and cheaper. For example you won't waste money on things you found you didn't need last time. Also do take some photos. When I quote on annual events I often ask for photos but organisers rarely have them. A picture is worth a thousand words and will help you get exactly the right system.

Be Clear About Your Requirements

When asking for an AV quote it's important to be clear about your requirements. At a basic level this might include:

- How many attendees
- Start and finish times
- How many microphones (wired and/or wireless)
- Any video screen requirements
- Venue access details, parking facilities and bump-in (setup) times

For example if I'm asked to quote on an event for between 500 -1,000 people I'm going to assume it's 1,000 and quote appropriately but with research you might be able to narrow down the numbers more accurately.

Source From The One Provider if Possible

In general you're better off getting one supplier to handle everything. An exception might be where it's easier for those items to be supplied in-house which might include items that are difficult to transport or need to be rigged from the ceiling. This might include, mounted projectors, large screens, staging and lighting.

Sponsorships

How much work is it to add a banner to your PowerPoint presentation and show it during the break? Not very much, yet the right advertiser might be willing to pay handsomely for that. This really depends on your audience. I saw this done only a few months ago quite well. For example if you're running a conference for doctors then a medical supply company might be pleased to sponsor the event in return for advertising. You could even give them a table at the back of the room where a representative can talk to prospects.

Parking

Not only can parking be expensive, you may also be paying labour charges if say the AV staff member has to park elsewhere and come back to the venue. Many venue loading docks only allow loading and unloading as the name suggests however if your bump-in is later in the day or after hours, the loading dock may have minimal traffic.

Ask the venue if your AV provider can stay parked in the loading dock. This will save time and effort and they will have easy access to their vehicle if they suddenly need extra equipment. Be sure to clear it with the loading dock staff though as sometimes a different company manages the loading dock and they can be very particular.

Low or Zero Cost Ways to Get Quality Results

We have talked a lot about saving money on your AV but we want to make sure you get good AV not just affordable AV. So what steps can you take without spending a lot of money to ensure excellent results? One could write a lot on this but I'll include five easy-to-implement steps that cost little or nothing to implement.

Always Have a Backup Plan

I'm always nervous about having only one of any piece of equipment or no alternative to using it. I did an event once where the client brought a laptop that was a critical part of the event. Right before start time it decided to do a Windows update that took 40 minutes so the event started half an hour late and I can tell you some of the patrons were not too happy. What if they had made a backup on a USB stick? There were plenty of other laptops they could have used at the venue. Let's discuss some specific examples:

Speakers

Generally you have at least two speakers and if one goes down you'll still have about 80% sound.

Audio mixers

A breakdown here is probably the worst thing that can happen. For a small event you can normally plug a single microphone directly into the speakers. For a larger event I would ask for a basic analog mixer as a backup. I always keep one in my van.

Wireless microphones

Keep a spare cabled microphone ready. They are very cheap to hire.

Projectors

Either use 2 x screens or keep a basic projector spare. Older 4:3 format projectors sell for almost nothing now. I bought one for around \$100 just to have as a spare. If projection is a big part of your event it's cheap insurance.

Good Speaker Coverage

Getting good sound coverage to the audience from your speakers helps get consistent level and tone and reduces the risk of audio feedback. It is more important than most people realise. Here's some tips on how to achieve that:

Speaker placement

This is often overlooked. You basically want to keep your speakers forward of the microphones and as far away as practical. When planning your room layout give careful thought to this. Too often it's an afterthought & you find yourself having to put speakers in less than optimal places.

Speaker quantity

It's common to use a pair of front positioned speakers but with larger events a pair of small "delay" speakers at the rear of the room can make a big difference meaning that you don't have to blast people at the front to make it loud enough at the back. They are traditionally called "delay" speakers because they tended to be slightly time delayed to allow for the speed of sound (so you didn't hear an echo). You can often get good results and save the hassle of timing delay by placing them right at the back and facing them forward towards the stage. Just keep the volume modest.

Correct Microphone Technique

Lapel Microphones

- Ensure they are the right distance from the presenter's mouth. Generally this is where their chin would hit their chest.
- Beware of clothing that may rub against the microphone capsule.

Handheld Microphones

- Ensure presenters know how to hold these the right distance. Generally 2-4cm from the mouth works well.
- Microphones with narrower pickup patterns have become very popular but this means it's more important than ever to stay "on axis" with them. This means the presenter should have their mouth facing directly at the microphone. This is sometimes a problem if they are presenting from a video screen or whiteboard and are turning to look at the screen.

Microphone Choice

A common choice is between hand held and gooseneck type microphones. Both types have their place but I'm a big fan of Goosenecks for conferences. The biggest benefit of a Gooseneck is that it's so easy to adjust the height to suit the presenter so the presenter will actually do it. A handheld on a stand needs to have the clutch screw loosened, the boom pulled down then re-tightened. Presenters tend to not do it with the result that some end up being too far from the microphone to be picked up well.



Gooseneck



Handheld

Wireless Microphones

I don't want to harp on about this as I've already mentioned wireless microphones above but with ever increasing wireless traffic from devices like phones, laptops other wireless AV gear the airwaves are becoming very congested. In fact when we do events in the Sydney CDB it's quite tricky to scan through and find enough clear channels. When you're running 1 or 2 wireless microphones it's not a real problem but as the number increases it gets much harder. The risks include dropouts, loud bursts of static and signal from other wireless microphones outside your event. Some of the better quality systems are able to filter out interference very well and handle large numbers of microphones at once but you really do pay a premium for them and they require some skill to operate. With all that in mind it's worth reviewing the use of wireless microphones. At least ask the question if you could get similar results using a wired alternative such as a gooseneck which can be floor, desk or lectern mounted.

Conclusion

I hope that you have found this information useful. If we may be of assistance with event AV you can contact us at www.sydneyhire.com.au.

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