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How to choose a caterer**Follow a checklist for event catering**

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Properly planning your next event doesn't have to be a chore. Take these steps to help ensure that your attendees not only enjoy themselves, but leave your event impressed.

Determine your audience

There are different kinds of corporate catering, so determine who will attend your event and why.

"Are these internal staff, or clients whom you will be taking out to thank for their business or are you wooing their business?" said Peggy Thompson, director of marketing for Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. "[You] need to get a sense of your audience so you know what you are looking for in your menus, the wine you are going to choose and the budget you will put together."

Plan your budget

The more specific you are about what you want and who will attend your event, the closer your caterer or event planner can get to an accurate cost.

"If it's an employee event, you may have one budget," Thompson said. "If it's a client event, you're probably going to have a very different budget."

Many companies charge either a flat fee or a per-person cost.

Select the right caterer

"From coffee breaks to hot and cold appetizers and full-plate sit-down dinners, corporate catering is as good as its caterer," said Sarah Jarvis, spokeswoman for Aramark Corp., a national event planning and catering company.

A qualified caterer, Jarvis said, should have customer experience, culinary and design creativity, operational efficiency and be well-versed in current food, flower and fabric trends. "What you are working for is a reliable and consistent event that has a variety of menus."

Large hotels, like the Four Seasons, can also design specialty menus by cultural tastes, season or theme. "Because we have many classically trained chefs, there is no end to what the menu can be," Thompson said.

Another important detail when planning a catering event is whether or not the event site will have the necessary china, glassware, tables and chairs.

"If you're choosing a catering location like a restaurant or hotel with event space, when you pay for food and beverage, you are also getting tables, chairs, china and glassware for the event," said Melissa Milione, director of catering and convention services for Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront. "But if you book an event at a museum, and you hire a catering company, you may have to pay for more than just the food."

Order online

Many catering and event planning companies have moved some or all of their operations to the Web. Carter Hoerr, president of Web-based Vmeals.com, points to the ease of planning your event online, as opposed to asking around the office for catering recommendations or searching someone's desk for lunch menus. Doing the latter puts you in the position of "sitting around and praying that the order is actually going to show up.

"It's a highly inefficient process for these mission-critical events," Hoerr said.

Ordering what you want online may be the better way to go. Vmeals offers access to restaurants and caterers in 30 markets around the U.S.

"You can look at restaurant menus with one click of the mouse," he said. Orders are processed and routed to the appropriate restaurant, which then delivers to your event.

Accent with wine

If you plan on having wine and alcohol at your event, check to see if your caterer has its own liquor license. Gladys Horiuchi, spokeswoman for the Wine Institute, said most state restaurant associations have service guidelines for serving alcohol, and most catering wait staffs have been trained in those guidelines. Still, double-check your state regulations for alcohol compliance at wi.shipcompliant.com/StateControlDirectory.aspx.

Choose the right venue

Where you hold your event can be just as important as what you serve.

"Ambience is important," Thompson said. "It gives you a direction for what the event is going to look like."

Jarvis said the proper room and table arrangement can fundamentally support a function's success. "For instance, if it's meant to be an event where you are bringing people together to network or cross-sell, then you want to have an environment that is conducive to mingling. So you don't want people seated around a big banquet table."

Decor is another factor to think about when considering the flexibility of your budget, Milione said.

"Some places you choose to do catering with might spend a lot more time and money just to make the location look better," she said. "You should take that into account, because decor can add up quickly as well."

Arrange for technology early

Most hotels and convention centers are set up to accommodate just about any request for high-speed Internet or video conferencing technology. But you might have to put in your request days or weeks in advance, so don't forget to put it on the checklist.

With just a little bit of thoughtful planning, and with the right people in place, your next event can be something every attendee will remember.

"These days, people are looking for what can make the difference in their event," Thompson said. "If you have events that require people to come back year after year, you have to give them something worthwhile."

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