



Issue Archives

Special Series
Subscribe
Media Kit 2009
Digital Magazine



MEETING BUDGET Decorating on a Budget

April 2007

by Nancy Mann Jackson

The room's décor can set the mood for your meeting or event - and it can also take a chunk of your budget. According to *Art of the Event: Complete Guide to Designing and Decorating Special Events* by James Monroe, raw materials for decorating are generally marked up between 50 percent and 100 percent, and labor sometimes includes a 300 percent markup. While outsourcing decorating duty is often a good idea, "most decorating firms cover the cost of designing and coordinating a project with a design fee that can vary from 5 percent to 15 percent of the total job cost," Monroe writes. Because decorating fees can add up quickly, some planners on a tight budget opt to handle their own decorations.

Often, their own creative decorating ideas, incorporating products found in bulk on eBay or at Goodwill, have made a big hit with attendees. "A motorcycle themed event done in tandem with Harley-Davidson's 100th Anniversary Celebration had us using unbranded décor items, but integrating the orange and black themes with linens," said Gloria Nelson, chief experience officer for Gloria Nelson Event Design. "Thirty-two pairs of black boots were filled with two orange gerbera daisies and one tiger lily, all tucked neatly into water-filled tubes with ming and tree fern. Six pairs actually walked out the door with the guests!"

Here, a few experienced planners share some of their favorite ideas for memorable décor without a high price tag.

Centerpieces

"I am a great believer in edible centerpieces; big baskets of a variety of breads is my favorite," said Patti Shock, professor and chair of the Tourism and Convention Administration Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' Harrah College of Hotel Administration. "You are going to serve bread anyway. Include breadsticks, lavosh, yeast rolls, sourdough, and others. Other ideas include a lazy susan with appetizers such as olives, pickles, stuffed celery, peppers, and salami; for a picnic, jars of pickles and condiments in unique containers; vegetable bouquets; or big lollipops." Start with the event's theme. "We have used goldfish in clear plastic or glass bowls; magicians' top hats stuffed with tissue paper and filled with decks of cards, a magic wand; sandpails and shovels with shells, starfish, and a net in the center," said Christy Lamagna, CMP, owner and chief strategist of Strategic Meetings and Events. "We've also used clean, empty paint cans filled with paintbrushes and paint stirrers with the organization's logo on the can and paint splatters on the labels for color. We simply printed labels for the cans ourselves."

Finally, consider piggybacking on the group that will be using the room before you. "If you can find out who is the group before you, reach out to their event manager and offer to buy their used centerpieces," Lamagna said.

Lighting

When it comes to creating atmosphere in a room, "lights can change the mood," Shock said. Choices include Tivoli lights, the "little twinklers" that are often strung in trees, strobe lights, and beacon lights, among others, she said.

"Par cams and lekos are going to be the least expensive and provide different elements because of the different applications," Nelson added. "To brand an event, the metal or glass integration of a Gobo light should be considered. This is particularly important if sponsors need recognition and can also be projected around the room or flashed on a backdrop. Lighting can also be used with a gobo pattern wash of almost anything, uplighting walls to give an effect to the room that is in keeping with a theme. If you're doing a jungle motif, for instance, consider using patterns and shapes that project ferns."

Sound

While not typically considered "decoration," incorporating sound into the room can help create the atmosphere you want at very little expense. "A room without sound is dead space," Shock said. "A tropical event could have birds chirping or a seafood buffet can have foghorns blowing intermittently. I once attended a Mardi Gras banquet where New Orleans jazz was being played; everyone danced into the room."

Backdrops

A simple backdrop can make a powerful difference at your event, especially when staging is required. "Pipe and drape is typically inexpensive on a linear foot basis and available in various colors," Nelson said. "Add some flame-retardant fabric such as a chic pongee that is swagged once or twice across the front of the stage and pop a couple of par-cam lights, typically found in-house at major hotels and convention sites, add some greens and columns with floral and your stage is simply and elegantly set. Using bulk fabric available from wholesalers can transition a stage from blah to bravo."

One of Nelson's clients wanted a Tour de France-themed event complete with races and leader shirts in yellow, green, and white with red polka dots. "The first two fabrics posed no problem, but the third was only available wholesale," she said. "I contacted the linen company, they cut 132-inch rounds that were draped and custom pinned

over the backdrop, and dinner napkins. The attendees liked the polka dot napkins so much, many were wearing them out the door on their heads," Nelson said, adding they were returned when the client realized their cost.

Novelties

For additional atmosphere, Nelson suggests branding the side of a Lightcube for signature drinks, noting, "Anything that glows in the dark adds pop to a room." Lamagna has wrapped boxes and coffee cans in event-themed paper or white paper with thematic wording printed on clear labels and stacked them to make attractive centerpieces that reinforce the meeting's message.

Contributing Editor Nancy Mann Jackson is a freelance writer in Birmingham, Ala.