

THE DONALD COOPER CORPORATION

Speaking internationally on marketing, management and business innovation



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Create more cost-effective events...

40 ways to save big money on your next conference!

To help you keep your next conference “on budget”, here are 40 cost-saving ideas that work. Some are from the good folks at Meetings & Incentive Travel Magazine (www.meetingscanada.com)...and some are from my own experiences in speaking at over 1500 conferences around the world.

1. Timing is everything: If you have some flexibility in the timing of your conference, there is big money to be saved by picking “off-peak” times. Ask your short-listed venues what their off-peak or “hot” dates are to save on both meal, accommodation and meeting room rates.

2. Potential for Saturday night savings: By having their annual sales meeting on a Friday, Saturday and Sunday, one company bringing in 40 people from across the country, saved more than \$30,000 on air fare.

Then, they gave each attendee a \$150 coupon for dinner for two so that they could treat their spouse to a fine dinner out, back home to make up for the fact that the meeting took their sales people away from home for a weekend. The net saving was still \$24,000. It's not always possible for attendees to travel on the weekend, but recommend it where possible.

3. Think locally: When it comes to venue selection, sourcing a local venue can help keep your costs under control. You'd be surprised how many lovely venues can be found by carefully looking in your own backyard. And don't limit your thinking...non-traditional venues often produce extraordinary events. And, for corporate events, a local venue makes it economically feasible to invite more of your internal support staff...which is a good thing.

4. Become a “Preferred Client”: Once your group has found a perfect location, returning every year gives you even more negotiating clout. If the venue staff knows your group, they'll go out of their way to provide first-rate service. Or, negotiate a 3 to 5 year conference contract with a particular hotel chain, using a different property in the chain each time.

5. Getting sponsors on board: The ability to attract major sponsorship participation is probably your biggest cost reducer. There are many businesses that want to increase their profile and build relationships with your attendees. These folks are your target sponsors conference bags, speakers, receptions, meals or breaks, etc. can add up to big savings. If you are hosting a tradeshow or exhibition, you can sell “coffee corners” to sponsors on the trade show floor.

6. Shorten receptions to reduce consumption: Shorten receptions from 60 minutes to 45 and don't announce last call. Jjust close the bar as scheduled.

7. Control food cost at receptions: In order to control costs, avoid labor-intensive foods such as sushi and carving stations. Serve passed hors d'oeuvres whenever possible. Guests eat less when they can't park themselves beside food stations or tables.

8. Reduce your bar bill and encourage responsible moderation: When using a host bar, give delegates two drink tickets. Most hotels don't have a problem with this, and since delegates are limited to two tickets, it cuts down on bar costs and prevents over-indulgence.

9. Limiting the time on the “host bar”: If issuing limited numbers of drink tickets doesn't appeal to you simply open a host bar for a limited time and then switch it to a cash bar at a specific, pre-announced time.

10. Wine at dinner: Instead of wasting wine by leaving a bottles on each table, have the wait staff circulate with a red and a white, and then return for refills, if required.

11. Get a deal on local wine: When hosting an event in a specific region where wine is produced, feature wines from that area. Not only is this thematically appropriate, it can produce real savings, especially if you deal directly with the wineries. Often, you can get wine at wholesale prices and pay for what is consumed rather than paying exorbitant costs associated with an open bar (almost double per bottle of wine).

12. Serve one ounce hard liquor drinks: Curbing liquor costs always leads to substantial savings. Have the venue serve drinks with one ounce of liquor by requiring bartenders to use jiggers or bottle attachments that pour out an ounce at a time. And avoid salty foods such as peanuts during hosted receptions. Attendees won't thirst for that extra drink.

13. Breakfast money-saving tip #2: If you're offering only a light continental breakfast, consider putting the breakfast at the back of the meeting room. The benefits are three-fold: with no "formal" breakfast, your delegates can sleep a little longer in the morning; you save on room rental because you won't need a separate breakfast room; and you'll be saving on F&B costs by not duplicating coffee at the meeting.

14. Breakfast money-saving tip #1: Continental breakfasts present great opportunities to save some money. Always order less than your expected attendance. Some attendees are bound to eat at home or in their hotel before coming to the event. It's not necessary to have enough food for every single person. But a word to the wise: don't skimp on coffee.

15. Breakfast money-saving tip #3: When ordering breakfast items, you can save by ordering coffee by the gallon and muffins by the dozen rather than ordering X-number of continental breakfasts. If you know your group, you can also gauge how much coffee vs. juice they will drink. In the end, it will mean cost savings...and a lot less wasted food.

16. How to save on alcohol at lunch: Some groups still offer a full bar with luncheons. Ask yourself if this is really necessary. If you wish to offer some alcohol at lunch, since many lunches are buffets, try adding wine, soft drinks and beer to the buffet table. You'll be surprised how many attendees opt to have juice or soft drinks.

17. Another beverage money-saving idea: When planning a mid-August conference at an aging venue, one planner anticipated the delegates need for lots of water and purchased water bottles for her attendees, complete with the logo of a sponsor. She informed the venue F&B staff to have plenty of cold water on hand so delegates could grab refills on the go. It saved on soft drinks and juice costs, and delegates returned home with their own personal water bottles.

18. Menu planning tip: When planning the menu, always provide the catering staff with your budget and any specific requirements or restrictions. Then, let them make menu suggestions from which you will choose. They may be able to save you money by combining some items that are being served to other groups in the facility that day. This can result in a cost saving or upgrades.

19. Stop feeding strangers: In large convention centers, setting up a refreshment area in a foyer or hallway leaves you vulnerable to the "help-yourself" syndrome, because chances are your delightful snacks will attract attendees cruising by from other meetings. If this could be a problem, consider having F&B stations set up inside your function rooms.

20. For small meetings, save money on lunch: For small meetings of less than a 15 people, consider having lunch in the hotel restaurant rather than providing a fully catered meal. A good local restaurant can also enrich your program...or order in pizza for an informal working lunch.

21. Two tips for saving on afternoon breaks: When booking F&B for a group's afternoon break, be sure to ask for "pop on consumption" - you only want to be charged for what is consumed. And if there is a dessert item at the lunch that is untouched, bring it out for the afternoon break. Not everyone can stomach dessert at lunch, but it makes a nice late-afternoon snack.

22. One more “coffee” tip: Coffee is expensive, so be sure that you know your numbers before ordering. Some hotels provide coffee on a per-person basis, others by the carafe. Also, if there is an error in the meeting room setup (which does happen), try to get the venue manager to provide more coffee or a reduction in the cost of your coffee, as an “apology”.

23. Saving on the closing banquet: Often, only 65 to 70 per cent of the group attends the final banquet. Providing the hotel or conference facility with rough numbers three days in advance, and then refine that number the day of the final dinner. Your costs can be greatly reduced.

One way to know how many will show up for that final banquet is to issue “Banquet Tickets” at registration and then ask folks to confirm table seating during the Conference at the Registration desk. This gives people an opportunity to choose table mates and lets you know who and how many will come to the dinner.

24. Saving on center pieces: A little creativity goes a long way, especially when it comes to table decorations. Instead of going with an expensive centerpiece, why not fill inexpensive crystal bowls with colored Christmas balls wrapped in clear cellophane and colorful ribbon. They make great after dinner prizes. Balloon bouquets are another nice option. To clear the balloons before an after-meal presentation, have prize coupons in some of the balloons and do a balloon pop. It’s bound to create excitement.

25. Signage is an essential part of any event, but it can be costly. Here’s an effective solution... design signs that can be re-used. Create several large generic signs with your logo/association or conference name etc. and smaller signs that can be attached by Velcro in the middle of the larger ones. The interchangeable smaller signs can give details such as the presentation title, speaker name, room location, directions, etc.

26. Use distinctive vests to identify volunteers and other staff: Vests are an excellent, inexpensive way to outfit volunteers and staff manning a registration area or conference booth. Vests are distinctive, they can fit over any type of clothing and can be used year after year.

27. Creative lighting: If you have a limited decor budget, creative lighting, especially gobos (projected shapes), can give you great bang for your buck. It’s especially effective in a room that needs darkness to make it appear at its best.

28. Choosing speakers who can add extra value: Choosing speakers who can do two presentations on your program can save you 40% on speaker fees and travel expense. Then, ask what else they could do to add value. I actually have a list of seven ways that I can be helpful, including doing some 30 minute 1-on-1 business coaching sessions or judging a “Best Business Card” competition. Clients love it.

29. Speaker gifts: It’s good form to present speakers with a token gift but decent gifts can be downright expensive. The solution, present them with a letter of thanks and make a small donation on their behalf to a local hospital or charity.

30. Reducing AV costs: LCD [Liquid Crystal Display] projectors are expensive to rent. Make sure that you don’t order more of them than you need. Not every presenter requires one. Check to find out.

31. Cost-saving partnership opportunities: This is a bit of a twist on the “sponsorship” idea. Cross promotions with suppliers are a great example of a successful partnership. One meeting planner partnered with the hotel venue to produce backpacks with the conference and the hotel logos on them. The hotelier helped offset the cost of purchasing the backpacks and printing the logos. After the conference, attendees continued to wear the backpacks, promoting the hotel. Leftover packs were used as promotional giveaways.

32. Another partnership example: The planner for a technology conference partnered with an audiovisual firm to get a discount on all their AV requirements by offering the AV company a trade show booth, and a promotional “plug” on the conference website, in the conference brochure and on conference signage.

33. Negotiate savings for a substantial prepayment: Some venues may be keen to have the cash flow from a substantial prepayment. Enquire if there is a saving to you by agreeing to “pay early”...but always hold enough back to cover any “errors or omissions” by the venue.

34. Developing rock-solid relationships with hotel partners and other suppliers invariably leads to cost savings or added value. Nurture relationships by being organized and easy to deal with, being flexible when you can and constantly “thanking” venue and other suppliers for their help and kindness.

35. Create “space” on your program for attendees to unwind, rewind, interact and re-group. Don't be afraid to build in free time. Not only is this appreciated by attendees, it saves on the cost of developing additional segments on the program with speakers or entertainers.

36. Hidden costs: Check contracts carefully for hidden costs and charges. Key items to watch for include taxes on accommodation, F&B and meeting space; gratuities on F&B; coat check charges; baggage charges; parking; telephone/Internet hook-up charges and room “drop charges”. Know what you're signing and negotiate reductions where you can.

37. Cancellation penalties: When negotiating your contract with a venue, always get their agreement that any cancellation penalties will be applied to future business booked within a specified period after the cancelled event.

38. Negotiate firmly but kindly: There are literally hundreds of venues and suppliers that want your business so don't be afraid to negotiate for a better price. This is especially true during the off-season.

39. Combining conferences: Combining your event with another related conference can save a bundle. For example, many buying groups or regional associations plan their annual meeting to be at the same time and place as a National Conference or Trade Show that their members will already be attending.

40. Collect and re-use badge holders: Gather them during the last session and announce beforehand that one badge will be drawn from the pile and a prize will be given out once the session is over. It's an added incentive to motivate delegates to stay until the end...and to be more “green”.

So, there you have it. Forty helpful ideas on how to save money on your next conference or event. For additional thoughts on how to create more effective conferences, see my short but insightful articles on...

- a) What business people *really* want from a conference.
- b) A guide to picking the right business speaker.
- c) 7 ways that Donald can add more value to your next business conference.
- d) Tips for better staging, lighting and room set-up.
- e) The ABCs of Name Badges that work.
- f) Four tips for better speaker introductions.
- g) Why conferences run late...getting the “coffee break” thing right.

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