

How to Evaluate and Choose an AV Provider

By Eric Bracht, Electro-Media Design & Consulting ©2010

During my nearly 20 years as an Audio Visual manager and director in various hotels I came to the inescapable conclusion that some meeting planners looked at me with the same suspicions that most people have about used car salesmen. Most of us know very little about cars and how they work, so what we do know when shopping for a car is this: we have to have one, they are really expensive, the value for what you get can vary greatly, and the wrong choice can end up being a whole lot of trouble. I think that pretty well sums up the way a lot of meeting planners feel about AV services.

I have known a lot of people in the AV and Production business over the years, and have found that the true AV professionals are interested in providing value and a great show. It is a well known saying in the AV business that you are only as good as your last show. Experienced AV companies realize this, and know that it is much easier to keep a current customer than to find a new one.

Yes, there are some out there that will brag about how much they charged for something that they would be willing to do for a lot less...but aren't there people like that in every business? I have heard others who tell me about how they charged \$500 a day for a laptop computer, and that their customer was happy to pay it. My response was usually the same..."no, they may have been satisfied with your overall value, so they tolerated being charged \$500, but I don't believe they were happy about it".

So how do you choose an AV provider? I would suggest evaluating any proposal on three major categories: Quality, Service and Price. Another tried and true saying in any sales organization is that "you can have it done right, done fast, or done cheap...pick two." Using this model, here are some of the benefits and consequences of each category:

1. Done Right: This speaks to quality. Is the equipment that your attendees see professional and in excellent condition, or can they find it in their local electronics store? There is a wide range of equipment available for nearly every item of AV, and the type of equipment being used will have an impact on the price. Quality also means that the entire show has been thought through, and that contingencies are covered. Extra equipment is either in place, or available as back up for insurance. The appropriate amount of qualified labor has been scheduled to provide speaker support. An AV supplier that bases their reputation on quality will probably be on the higher side of your estimates, but they will have all of the bases covered.

2. Done Fast: This speaks to service. How many technicians/operators/coordinators will be assigned to your event? Are they experienced enough to handle last minute requests and challenges, often in front of a room full of people and a nervous presenter? All AV and Production companies have equipment, and by reviewing proposals that equipment can be compared in an "apples to apples" review. Service is the great unknown; the variable which can make or break a show. In-house providers will say that their knowledge of the facility and on-site equipment and staff will give them the edge. Outside providers will say that they will be dedicated to your event rather than being responsible for the entire hotel. Each are valid points. Experience is the best indicator. If you don't have experience with the AV services available at a facility or location, ask around to see who does. Get a few opinions, throw out the glowing recommendation and the scathing rant and the middle ground should be reliable.

3. Done Cheap: This speaks to price. Everyone wants, and needs, to pay a fair value for the equipment and services they receive. Price is often the number one factor in selecting an AV provider, which may not always be in your best interest. I am not suggesting that you should never go with the lowest bid, but

I am suggesting that you need to evaluate Items 1 and 2 and assign some type of value to making sure they are covered. “Cheap” won’t matter to your CEO/President if they are embarrassed by technical problems during a presentation. All things being generally equal, there are two ways for an AV provider to bring down the cost: Be willing to make a little less profit on the show (which is good for you) or use lower quality equipment and cheap labor to keep their cost down (which could be very bad).

Being clear in your RFP about your expectations in all of these areas will help the AV providers to craft a proposal which meets your needs, balancing all three areas rather than sacrificing one to get the other two. And just like with car shopping it is always good to have some expert advice, like an independent mechanic who can help evaluate your options.
