

The Venue Decides Everything: What Every Event Professional Should Know Before Signing That Contract



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I'm currently in Madrid as a hosted buyer and one of my favourite parts of the job is getting to experience venues in person. No two venues are the same and getting to walk the floors, feel the energy of a space and understand what it truly has to offer is something you simply can't replicate from a website or a showreel.

The venue can make or break an event, no matter how brilliant the content or the speakers; one poor experience is what an attendee will carry home. So when I'm assessing a space, I'm always thinking about the full journey, from the moment someone walks through the door to the moment they leave.

Below are some of the key areas that I consider. What would you add to this? The first question I ask myself when evaluating a venue is not how beautiful it is but how easy it is to reach. A stunning space that your guests cannot get to efficiently will generate frustration before the event has even begun. I always check proximity to metro and rail connections, whether the surrounding area feels safe at night and whether there is adequate parking for those arriving by car. Just as important is the logistics of arrival. Can taxis and ride-shares pull up cleanly without blocking a main road? Is there a designated drop-off area? Can coaches get close enough to the entrance without making guests walk a significant distance? These are small details on paper, but they set the emotional tone from the very first moment a guest arrives.

The Space Does the venue actually fit the event, not just in terms of capacity but in terms of character and flow? A product launch needs a different energy from a leadership summit. A gala dinner has completely different spatial demands from a hybrid conference. In my experience, the most common mistake is falling in love with a headline room without properly walking through how attendees will actually move through the whole venue. Think about transitions. Where will people go during registration, coffee breaks, networking and session changes? Are there bottlenecks, narrow corridors, awkward stairwells, or confusing signage that will frustrate attendees and disrupt the rhythm of your programme? Walk the space as a guest, not as a planner and it will tell you everything.

Dietary Requirements: This is an area where venues vary widely and the gap between what is promised and what is delivered can be significant. Catering to a diverse audience means going beyond token gestures. A single sad salad on a buffet table is not a vegan option. Gluten-free should not mean removing the bread roll and hoping for the best. I always ask venues directly: how do you handle allergies in a busy service setting? How do you prevent cross-contamination? What does your halal or kosher provision actually look like in practice? The quality of a venue's answers tells me a great deal about their operational rigour. Food is deeply personal and guests who feel overlooked at the table will remember it.

Access for Less Able Attendees Accessibility is non-negotiable and it goes far beyond having a ramp at the front entrance. I have visited venues that tick every box on their accessibility checklist and still make life genuinely difficult for guests with mobility challenges, visual impairments, or hidden disabilities. The entrance may be level, but what about the breakout rooms? The stage area? The restrooms? Think carefully about seating arrangements during sessions. Are wheelchair users placed in a way that feels inclusive rather than segregated? Is the route from the seating area to the food and beverage stations manageable? I always bring these questions to site visits and push for honest answers rather than reassuring ones.

Access for Suppliers: Your AV team, florist, caterers, exhibition builders and décor specialists all need to get in, set up and get out often within tight windows. A venue with poor supplier access adds cost, stress and risk to every element of your production. I look at the loading bay location and size, lift access for heavy equipment and whether the venue has logical, protected routes from the loading area to the event space. The most valuable thing I do at this stage is bring my key suppliers on the site visit before we commit to anything. My AV director will spot power and rigging issues I would miss. My set designer will clock ceiling heights and structural limitations in seconds. Do not wait until the build day to discover that the goods lift is too narrow for your staging.

Lifts and Stairs Vertical movement through a venue rarely gets enough attention in the planning phase. In multi-floor venues, I think carefully about how guests will flow up and down, particularly during peak transition moments between sessions. A single lift serving 400 delegates is a recipe for queues and complaints. Hotel venues require particular thought. You are sharing the infrastructure with hotel guests who have every right to use the lifts too. During a busy conference morning, that creates real congestion. I always discuss the exclusivity of lift access with hotel venue teams and plan contingencies. Well-positioned, clearly signposted staircases can do a lot of the heavy lifting, if you will forgive the phrase, when the lifts are under pressure.

Pillars, I have a strict personal policy: always check the pillars. Architectural pillars might look elegant in an empty room but the moment you put 200 people in that space for a keynote, they become a sightline problem. Guests seated behind a pillar cannot see the stage or the screen and depending on the acoustics, may struggle to hear clearly. In my experience, many venues are slow to volunteer this information. I always request a detailed floor plan and identify the pillar locations before I even begin thinking about seating configurations. For plenary sessions in particular, a room with significant structural columns is one I approach with great caution.

HVAC — Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning. Temperature is one of the most powerful and most neglected factors in attendee experience. A room that is too hot will make people sleepy, irritable and disengaged within the first hour. A freezing room will send them hunting for their coats rather than focusing on your programme. The critical question is not whether the

venue has air conditioning. It is whether that system can respond in real time to the actual conditions on the day, a room that fills with 300 warm bodies behaves very differently from an empty space. I always ask about zoned control, responsiveness and whether a venue technician will be on hand during the event. This is not a nice-to-have. It directly affects whether your content lands.

Power. Every event is more technically complex than it was a decade ago. Hybrid setups, LED walls, charging stations and interactive installations all require reliable, adequate power. I always ask venues early about the number and location of power points, the available voltage, and the circuit's load capacity. This conversation becomes especially important when you are working with AV or technical production companies that have specific requirements. Do not assume that because a venue has hosted large events before, it has the power infrastructure your particular show needs. Get your technical suppliers to review the venue's power specs before you sign anything.

Floor Plans Always request the official floor plans and never rely on a hand-drawn sketch or a rough diagram from the venue. Official plans provide accurate dimensions, column positions, fire exit locations, service access points, and the full geometry of the space. They are the foundation of every other planning decision you make. Once you have them, invest in having a professional designer produce your usage drawings. A skilled event designer will identify spatial problems before they become real ones, optimise traffic flow and create a layout that serves both the programme and the guest experience. It is not an extravagance; it is risk management with a visual output.

A Few Further Considerations Cloakrooms are chronically underestimated. For a winter conference or a gala dinner where guests arrive in coats, an inadequate cloakroom will create queues, confusion and a chaotic start to the event. I always check the size and staffing plan.

Value beyond the day rate, what's included, what's extra and whether the venue team sees themselves as a genuine partner in making your event a success.

Sustainability credentials are increasingly important to both clients and attendees and I factor them in from the very first conversation.

Restrooms follow the same logic. Capacity, cleanliness and location matter. A single set of restrooms on a different floor from your main event space creates a logistics problem at every break.

Quiet spaces have become genuinely important. Neurodivergent attendees, those managing anxiety, or simply guests who need a moment away from a stimulating environment, will benefit enormously from a clearly designated, low-stimulus area. Venues that already have these in their offering are ahead of the curve.

WiFi remains a contentious topic. Venue-provided WiFi is notoriously unreliable under conference load. I ask detailed questions about bandwidth, the number of concurrent users the network supports, and whether a dedicated SSID can be provisioned for event use. When the stakes are high, I work with a technical supplier to bring in dedicated connectivity.

Risk Assessments: Whatever the size of the event, whether it is a board dinner for twelve or a conference for twelve hundred, I carry out a formal risk assessment. Not because it is required, although often it is but because the process itself is valuable. Writing down what could go wrong forces you to think more carefully than you otherwise would and it surfaces issues early enough

to address them. A good risk assessment covers physical safety, supplier failure, weather contingencies, medical emergencies and anything else specific to your venue and audience. It does not need to be a bureaucratic exercise. It needs to be honest, practical, and shared with everyone on your team. The venues and events that have run most smoothly in my career are the ones where we planned hardest for what we hoped would never happen.

Venue selection is, at its heart, an act of care for your attendees. Every question you ask, every site visit you walk, every detail you push on is an investment in their experience and a quiet statement about how seriously you take the job of bringing people together. That's what makes this work worth doing well, not just finding a room that fits but finding the right place for the right people at the right moment.