

On Alcohol Liability...Post-Event Reports...and Making A Plain Site Look Like A Million Bucks

BY MARIANNE EVANS



How do you limit your liability at events where alcohol is served?

Michaels: First, we get together with the client and review their past history. We look at what patterns there might be or not be regarding alcohol consumption. We apprise the host of the need to keep an eye out for overconsumption. Or we might get the bartender to serve watered-down drinks to people who have clearly had enough. But we never argue the point—being confrontational can make people drink more. If there is valet parking, we arrange to have coffee and cookies—breaded ones that absorb the alcohol—that people can consume while they're waiting for their cars. If people are carrying out a drink with them, we offer them a cup of coffee or bottle of water to replace it. If we see that people are inebriated, we offer shuttle service to their homes. Then the car is delivered to them the next day. We're diplomatic about it. We'll say something like 'Oh, you've had a long party...this is a service we're providing.' Another tactic is to close the bar early. We'll

day. Or, if the event is at a hotel, make sure there are some rooms available for people who may need to be put up for the night.

Genis: We've shifted over toward using venues that agree to take on the liquor liability. We're no longer responsible for it. The venue has to provide liquor liability to the client. It's a condition for using the venue. To avoid problems, we always make sure the bartenders are well informed and aware of what's going on. They know to come to us right away if there's a problem. Event planners need to monitor the guests. Sometimes people have serious drinking problems. I've seen people show up at events already drunk. Or they might be mixing prescriptions with liquor. You have to be aware of problem drinkers—and call them a cab. One of our major corporate clients has started limiting the amount of time that the bar is kept open. Or there is the option of issuing drink

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GUY GENIS

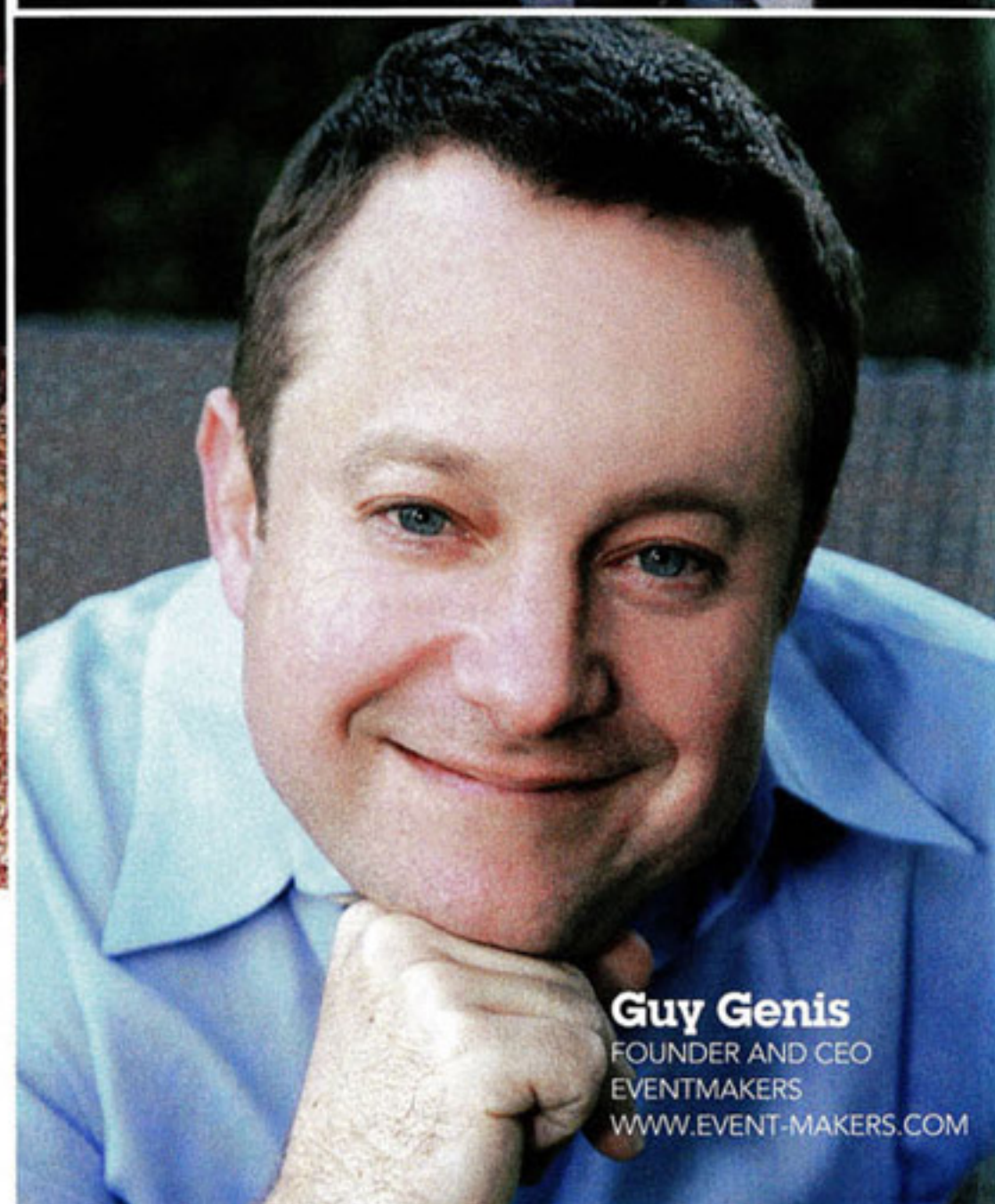
tickets. Avoiding liquor problems is a big factor for corporate clients. They don't want this associated with their name.

My client wants a post-event report. What are the important points to include?

Michaels: We start with a comprehensive written checklist that asks for the client's evaluation of every element of the event. Did the timing work? Did you like the entertainment? What did you like best about the entertainment? Was the flow right? What was your least favorite aspect of the event? What would you have changed about it? If there is anything that they feel could be improved, we want to discuss it with them, so we can understand why they weren't happy. It could be something like complaints that a waiter was rude. If so, can you identify him? We want to know. How did things compare to what was promised? The follow-up is a crucial part of the event. And don't lose time—do the follow-up as soon as possible. The next day if you can.

Levine: It's important to address any incidents at the event—good and bad. We always report any damages—say, a guest burned a hole in something with a cigarette—and losses right away. So the client knows right away what they might be responsible for. It's always best to work this out soon, as it gets more difficult to resolve the longer you wait. There might be an overage in the catering. Or, conversely, the client may have money due back to them. Do this kind of accounting as soon as possible. Sometimes you need to educate the client about the event by giving them your assessment of how it went and why. Some clients are inexperienced. It may even have been their first event and they might not have the frame of reference to know why it was a great event. You may need to point out the things that showed that the event was a success—that people danced, that they stayed late, etc.

Genis: What's very important is to provide a guest count versus the



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have a last call and then start serving coffee and plenty of food. We also try to avoid serving spicy foods that make people want to drink more. Serving sweet foods works well, because people usually don't want to drink liquor when they're eating something sweet.

Levine: Make sure the liquor provider has a license and is insured. It's important to get a certificate of insurance from the client and the liquor provider. Brief the staff on who will be at the event. Tell them that if someone is drinking too much, to cut them off. Make sure they don't just get in their car and drive away. The client should provide car service to give people a ride home. Then they can pick up their cars the next

RSVP count. The client will want to know the actual guest count at the event, who actually showed up. Another really big point is to ask whether or not the event met the client's expectations. We generate 3-D images for them beforehand—and our hope is that the actual event met or even surpassed those images. Why is this important? There are so many event planners out there now vying for the same piece of business. All you have is your ability to provide better customer service and to deliver a better event. The best thing to do is to cover your clients as closely as possible. To make sure they're happy and won't go somewhere else.

How do you make a plain site look like a million bucks on a limited budget?

Michaels: You want to diminish what you don't want people to see.

Say it's a convention center with nothing but ugly walls, ugly ceiling and ugly floors. In cases like this, we've built false walls four feet out and adorned them with floral sconces that we lit up. The eye was drawn to where the lighting was focused. It's always good to create a beautiful entrance. So the first impression has a real "wow" factor. And the food stations should be decorated beautifully—another way to accentuate the focal points.

Entertainment is also a great distraction from a plain space. You can have strolling singers and cirque acts. Another tactic is to make the space even uglier. We had an event at an old sugar mill and we turned it into the "Rocky Horror Picture Show," with "blood" dripping off the silo and so on. It was really ugly, but it worked.

Levine: Decorating an ugly space is always a matter of budget. When the budget is small, lighting is the easiest way to overcome defects. You can bring in trees and other props and accentuate the lighting on them. These are things that take your attention away from unattractive walls and they create ambience. If the budget is bigger, you can drape the walls in fabric and also the ceiling. Decorative items can be accentuated with lighting. We're doing an event now where we're re-carpeting the floor and draping the ceilings. Everything is being covered. A contemporary look is being created. You can also do a lot with table décor. And it's important to have a nice stage. Make it a focal point. Beautiful tables and a nice stage go a long way. They will make the rest go away.

Genis: The more neutral the space, the better. The ultimate is a space with white walls because white takes color. With today's LED lighting, you can create great color backdrops on white walls. One of the biggest challenges is with hotel ballroom carpeting as many hotels use print carpeting because it doesn't show the dirt. It's very important to re-carpet the room if you can because a busy print carpet fights with everything else. And the event design starts from the ground up. Unfortunately, re-carpeting is very expensive and a lot of companies no longer want to pay for it. It's always best if you can find a neutral floor. Even a plain cement floor is fine. Depending on the guest count, it's always best if you can make the space smaller. Put up some panels or drapery to create more intimacy. If there is too much space, people will really notice the imperfections of the room. ■