

HOW TO ORGANISE A NETWORKING DINNER

INTRODUCTION

This Best Practice guide has been compiled to share best practice in organising a networking dinner for professionals.

An organising committee of 3 - 4 committed people (with mix of bros and sis) can easily arrange such an event.

Ideally Step 1 should start **at least 3 months before the day of event itself.**

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OBJECTIVES

Start with the end in mind! – Clarify what you want to have achieved by the end of the event, ideally in **SMART** format

- **Specific**- Clear goal agreed by the team e.g. fundraise £6000 for next year's activities
- **Measurable** - Ensure you can meet at regular intervals to confirm progress is being made e.g. Measuring number of tickets sold, leaflets distributed etc.
- **Achievable** - The objective should be realistic for the manpower, skills and funding available, e.g. selling 150 tickets, gaining 10 new sponsors, increase number of new members by 50
- **Relevant** - To the time of year, people involved and audience
- **Time bound** - A deadline should be set to keep the team focussed. Breaking the project into small chunks with a few deadlines helps with team motivation and allows allowances for unexpected setbacks

1. VENUE

Choose the right venue! Priorities include:

- **Location, location, location** – ensure it is easily accessible to the majority of your target audience, e.g. for students, think about public transport links including rail and bus and for professionals travelling from outside the city prioritise venues close to the motorway.
- Suitably established, up-market, prominent area of town. Avoid poorly sign posted venues.
- Clean wash room facilities as people will complain if not!
- Can offer a suitable price per head, in line with your pricing strategy
- Suitable wudhu and prayer facilities
- Large enough hall to cater for your expected audience, but ideally flexible so you can reduce/increase head count, depending on number of people
- Not too big of a deposit required upfront
- Do they offer suitable catering facilities? (see below)

3. CATERING

- If the venue does not offer suitable catering facilities, consider local restaurants willing to offer discounts in return for advertising – e.g. on flyers, posters, announcement during the event
- Consider variety of audience and their needs – mild-medium dishes, vegetarian options
- Ensure plentiful supply of drinks throughout the event – if venue allows, purchase from wholesaler to save cash
- Check with venue re: availability of dinnerware and any extra costs
- If purchasing food from outside the venue, ensure appropriate pick up/delivery time (minimum of one hour after start of event) and check when they would like pots, dishes, trays etc. returned

4. PRICING STRATEGY & BUDGET

- All-inclusive venues will typically charge a fixed cost per head e.g. £15pp. Try to negotiate with them as much as possible!
- Decide: Do you want to just break even, or are you fundraising for a cause?
- You must then decide how much to charge your attendees. Things to consider:
 - Open to families? If so, lower price/free for children?
 - Early bird discounts - can work if a suitable deadline is set and stuck to! (i.e. don't keep the lower early bird price if the deadline is passed, because you haven't got enough booking yet!)
 - Remember you will have other costs to cover as well e.g. refreshments, drinks, table centrepieces and decorations if not provided by the venue, speakers travel cost, speakers' gifts, etc.

Note other events of interest to your audience happening at a similar time – ensure not only that the events don't clash but also adjust marketing elements or prices so you encourage further attendance

- Ideally allocate one member of the team to take care of finances
- Consider funding via other means, e.g. sponsorship from companies or institutes, collaboration with another organisation, selling stall spaces, auction
- Attach sample budget from a previous event?
- See separate Best practice guide on sponsorship

5. START AND END TIME

- If weekday evening, most people finish work by 5.30pm, so 6.30pm will be the earliest convenient start time
- If weekday evening, ensure end time also publicised – if audience know the event will finish by 8.30 or 9pm, it will encourage them to attend as will not disrupt their sleeping/work pattern
- Flexibility is a huge advantage in weekend events. Also start time can be earlier (e.g. 5pm) and end time later (e.g. 11pm)

Consider the following:

- Schedule for the day - number of activities planned
- Speakers invited - are they likely to stick to the time frame?
- Are families/children invited?
- How far will the attendees be travelling?
- Fit salah breaks in the schedule (minimum 15mins per salah)

6. CONTACT SPEAKERS AND INVITEES

- Do your research on speakers rather than taking recommendations – listen to their talks, ask about their field of expertise, ensure they will engage well with the audience
- Contact national/international speakers at least two months in advance – you may not get a response immediately but persistence is key
- Find out if relevant international speakers are doing tours around the time of your event
- Ensure your budget is set before deciding on speakers



7. ADVERTISING

- Create a poster and short blurb about the dinner. Don't forget main details: Title, short blurb, speakers (confirmed), date, time, venue, cost of tickets and contact numbers for info/tickets
- Create a booking page with payment facility on your website or using www.eventbrite.com
- **Advertise ASAP** – at least one month prior to the event
- Utilise social media – create event pages and share poster on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp etc. Consider creating a promotion video on YouTube for largescale events
- **Publicise like crazy!** Think masjids, community centres, universities too etc.
- Remember that (unfortunately!) most people will still book in the last 7 days up to the event – don't be disheartened if you don't sell tickets until then! Many will probably book a ticket the night before. Some might even turn up at the door without a ticket!

7. SHORTLIST ACTIVITIES AND SCHEDULING

- Consider starting with Qur'an recitation and explain the agenda for the day (ideally have this up on a projector screen or distribute on tables)
- Consider doing some research pre-event and find out what your guests would ideally like to do/get out of the evening? This highlights the importance of feedback forms
- Don't overdo the schedule with too many speakers
- Have a balance between 'organised' activity and 'free time', bearing in mind latecomers may disrupt organised activity, hence consider 'free time' in the first half hour after registration/welcome
- Consider a structured ice-breaker activity at the beginning (depending on age range and variety of audience)
- Schedule the 'popular' speakers towards the end of the event to ensure people stay and remain focussed!
- Consider entertainment breaks e.g. nasheed artists at the beginning, when serving dinner and at the end
- Leave enough 'free time' for networking and consider a structured networking session e.g. 10 min open microphone session, 2 min per speaker
- Review your main objectives for the dinner again, and adjust your scheduling accordingly

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9. STALL HOLDERS

- Keep stalls low-cost and take payment as soon as stall is booked
- Target stall offerings to suit audience, charities and speakers invited

10. PLAN FOR THE EVENING

- Decide on where to have the registration desk, and who will be manning it. Consider a volunteer/staffing rota and pick those who are socially forthcoming or at least have the ability to smile!
- Consider distributing a printed schedule either on tables or personally to attendees at the registration desk. You may want to provide other printed material e.g. copy of PowerPoint, advertising information for future events, feedback form
- If the dinner is formal, particularly for the purpose of professional networking, will your attendees be provided with name badges?
- Agree on a uniform for volunteers (formal wear/ similar colour scarves/shirts/ties etc.) and name badges if necessary
- Consider seating arrangements – segregation / Family areas?
- VIP seating at the front for speakers and special guests
- If there are plans to assign seats or table numbers to attendees, what will these be based on? Also ensure seating arrangements are clear on the day – lists on a board on entry and registration, names of attendees on each table, etc. Leave one or two (or three!) tables for those who turn up on the day
- Research salah times and plan salah venue, ensuring adequate space, segregation and time, as well as plentiful wudhu facilities
- For family events, consider organising volunteers and facilities for a children's corner/crèche facility?
- Consider arranging Audio-Visual equipment if required, test and arrange a back-up in case of technical difficulties
- Ensure all slides and materials to be used by speakers are emailed to you in advance, anticipating formatting and technical issues. **Make the slides uniform where possible**

Have a team walk through of all of above at least 2 hours before the event

11. CONTINUE ADVERTISING!

- Until the day of the event! Chase RSVP's – send reminder emails and texts
- Word of mouth works miracles. Invite close friends and family, sell the event to them personally, send personalised texts and make phone calls too

12. RECRUIT “ON-THE-DAY” VOLUNTEERS

- Consider **creating a WhatsApp group for volunteers** to assess progress and share information prior to and on the Day!
- Provide an incentive for volunteers, e.g. certificate, free entry

13. CONFIRM ALL IMPORTANT THINGS!

- Final confirmation of speakers, ensuring they have adequate time to reach venue and freshen up prior to the event
- Consider meeting with volunteers in the days leading up to the event to confirm final schedule and tie up loose ends
- Liaise with the venue and caterers in the week preceding the event to confirm details, e.g. numbers, refreshments, catering (if applicable), audio visual aids, etc.
- Don't forget little but important items e.g. prayer mats, napkins, spare laptop, memory card with PowerPoint presentations, etc. Smooth running makes a huge difference to your attendees and highlights the thought that's gone into the event

14. EVENT NIGHT

- Try not to leave too many important tasks to the morning of the day itself - either sort out the night before or **delegate to others**
- Ensure volunteers are given sufficient breaks and have meals available
- Ask attendees to complete feedback forms and hand in on way out
- Professional photography may help with publicity of organisation. Also utilise budding amateur photographers

ENJOY – Do not let others see you looking tense or arguing with staff etc.

15. POST-EVENT THANK YOU COMMUNICATION

- Consider issuing certificates to volunteers and gifts to speakers
- Thank you email can be sent following the event, with a link for online feedback if not already completed on the day

16. ASSESS AGAINST INITIAL OBJECTIVES - DEBRIEF

- Ensure a Team de-brief session within 5 days of the event
- Start by asking them how they feel it went
- Gather positive and constructive feedback from attendees and discuss with the team. You'll find there isn't usually a huge disconnect in thoughts!

17. TIDY UP OUTSTANDING PAYMENTS ETC.

- Ensure you make all payments due, in 7 days or as early as possible, stick to dates agreed for payment or inform suppliers early on of delays. Do not ignore as your reputation as an event organiser depends on this

18. CREATE A BEST PRACTICE REPORT

- Collectively create a report following the Debrief session that can be used by yourselves, future teams and potentially other organisers to help with budgeting and learning from prior concerns,

Final Note: Recognise the difference between fundraising & sponsorship:

- Fundraising is the act or process of raising funds for a specific cause, charity or project. E.g. bake sale, sponsored challenges, bucket collections, asking for lump sum donation etc.
- Sponsorship is a business transaction between two organisations that provides money for a project, services or an event carried out by your organisation. This partnership should be considered as a business transaction as the partnership generally benefits both parties in the agreement and is usually contractually binding

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