

How to Choose a Band or Performer for Your Wedding, Company Party, Dinner Function or Private Event

By Marty Dickinson, Manager of Music Mates, LLC

I went to an Internet convention in Las Vegas a couple of months ago. Between hours worth of seminar presenters, the event staff attempted to break the monotony with a scheduled appearance of an Elvis impersonator. The audience was curious...for about three minutes.

Then, the crowd got bored, lost interest, started talking with each other; and some left the room to check their voice mail or conduct business. The Elvis continued for another 10 or so minutes. Then, the event planner gave him the hand signal from the back of the room. He had two minutes to tie-it up and get off the stage.

The problem was not that the Elvis performer lacked skill or was sub-quality. He just wasn't a good fit for the crowd at that time of the conference.

One of the most difficult chores of any event coordinator is to select entertainment that is fitting for an audience. Whether it's a wedding, corporate event, or private party, the hope is to engage the people in attendance so that they have a good time. Here are some tips to accomplish that.

Tip 1 – Select a performer to match your audience, not for your own interests.

This is probably one of the most overlooked steps I hear of. If your audience enjoys classic rock, don't hire a country band. Find out what people are interested in seeing and being a part of. What type of performer or group will keep your audience in the room and interested?

Tip 2 – Decide if you're looking for just a band or a real performance

Do you want your audience to walk away from the event talking about the entertainment for months to come? Or, do you want the band more in the background so that you can pursue a different agenda?

The reason the Elvis didn't work out well at the Vegas conference was because people paid \$1,000 to attend the event to receive Internet strategy training. They were not there to be entertained. That would come after hours at their choosing. What would have been more appropriate for that situation could've been a harpist playing in the lobby during breaks or a piano player playing some classical background music.

On the other hand, a band hired to play at a company Christmas party "should" be talked about for months or even years to come. This will require a strong front-person that can sing and work the crowd. This person needs to be able to watch the audience and guide the band by switching gears quickly to keep the audience participating.

Tip 4 – Determine what level of experience the performers must have

How long has the group been together? What groups did the musicians play for before being part of this band? Where have they played before? To what size of audience? These are all questions that should be asked of any band or performer before hiring them. A band's ability to really work a crowd and get them involved on the dance floor is accomplished only through experience. If it is important that your audience let loose and have a great time, seek experienced musicians and ask for proof of their experience.

Tip 5 – Get “specific” references and written letters of recommendation

Bands get asked all the time for references. But, successful event planners ask for very specific references. Remember Tip #2 (looking for just a band or a performance)? If the band you hire must be able to adapt to a specific kind of audience, you want to get references from some people that saw that band perform to a similar group of people.

If you want to find a band that can entertain a group of elderly at a nursing home, then you want to get references from nursing home staff that have seen the band perform. If you're looking for a classical guitar player to perform during a black-tie dinner for a small group of board of directors, you need to get references from others who have hired the guitarist to perform at formal dinners.

Tip 6 – Know what types of songs will you expect the band to play

I know of two wedding bands...that call themselves full-time wedding bands...that absolutely refuse to play “The Chicken Dance.” As corny of an exercise as it is, “The Chicken Dance” is one of the most widely requested songs at weddings. Yet, these two bands will not play it even if you give them a \$100 bill. They're insulted if you even ask.

Know in advance if there are any specific songs that must be played at your event and go through them with the bandleader. Most bands will offer to learn special songs for you even if they've never heard them before. If you ask for one or two songs, there will possibly not be an additional charge. But, if you require a custom-made performance featuring 5 or 10 songs or more that the band must learn and rehearse, expect to pay a well-deserved additional fee.

Tip 7 – Know who the backups are

There's always a possibility that the singer can get sick or the drummer breaks an arm in a snowboarding accident. Since many bands are booked, many months in advance, it's likely that at least one of the band members has changed to a new group and a replacement has come in. You need to be guaranteed that the replacement entertainers are as good as the main group and that backups are already planned for. Sometimes you'll come across a band that is inexperienced and they'll say something like, “Oh, we don't need backups. We never get sick.” And, that's the time you should consider looking for other entertainment, because there's always the chance for something to go wrong.

Tip 8 – Paying good money for a good band is worth it

Whether band members know this statement or not, “performing music is a business.” Guitar strings need to be purchased. Microphones need to be replaced. Long distance phone calls cost money and so does the gas to put in the truck that may have been rented to get the drum set to your venue. A friend of mine had a lavish wedding where they spent nearly \$1,000 on just the cake, \$5,000 on the wedding dress, \$4,000 for the catering, and...\$250 for the band. The bass player never showed up. The singer’s voice was blown out from the concert he attended the night before. After the band played their first set, about half of us left the reception and went to a bar down the street where a “real” band was playing.

Now, I’ve heard plenty of great bands that would’ve gladly played at a wedding for \$250. You don’t have to pay \$2,000 to get a good band. And, paying a \$2,000 price tag doesn’t mean that the band is going to be any better. All that I’m saying is that if it requires paying more money to get the better band, then it’s worth considering. You don’t want your audience to walk away after the first set.

Tip 9 – Always negotiate price

Bandleaders love the idea of getting more business from a performance. If you can convince them that there will be people in the audience that will probably hire them for another event, they will likely give you a break in their price. Another great time to negotiate is if you have a last-minute performance opportunity and the band is not booked for another performance that day. This happens frequently when a band has to cancel at the last minute. Speaking of canceling at the last minute, that leads me into the next tip:

Tip 10 – Offer to feed the band prior to performance

If your wedding reception has a buffet, allow the band to take a plate. If your company party is at a restaurant, give the band a menu to order from and tell them you will cover the cost. At a friend’s company party that I attended, the meeting planner even provided a separate eating room for the band. After all, the musicians didn’t know any of the people in the company, so why should they be made nervous by forcing them to sit with us during dinner? They appreciated being away from the group until showtime.

The moral is if you keep your band happy before they go on stage, you’ll get a warmer, happier performance when they are on stage.

Also, food is a good negotiating tool. Tell the bandleader that you will be providing food for the band and they might give you a better deal.

Tip 11 – Always have a backup band at hand

Many times a band that you hire will have a backup anyway, so you might not have to worry about finding a replacement group yourself. So, ask the band you’ve hired if they have a backup band that can step-in at the last minute and cover the show if the need arises. And, know in advance if you are to contact that replacement band or if your hired band will handle that if the need arises.

Tip 12 – Visit a performance prior to hiring

You can get all the demo CD's and promo packs in the world sent to you. But, until you see your future performers in action either live or at least on video, you won't truly know if they'll be a good fit for your audience. Particularly watch how the front person engages with the audience. Does the person smile a lot? Are jokes told between songs? Is the audience encouraged to join the dance floor?

Tip 13 – Talk to the bandleader, not just the agent

When an agent is part of the deal, make sure that you get a phone number and contact name for the bandleader. Specifics related to the performance should always be coordinated with the bandleader. If the agent is present during those discussions, fine. But, the agent is really just responsible for “making the deal.” The band and the bandleader specifically is responsible for a “successful performance.”

Tip 14 – Always sign a detailed contract

Musicians have experience with bar owners conveniently “mishandling” their performance payments. For this reason and others, it is common for a band or musician to have a prepared contract ready for you to sign. But, just in case they don't, you really need to have one yourself. The contract should include at least the following:

- Date, time and location of the performance
- How many musicians will be present
- Who is responsible for providing sound and lighting equipment
- Who will operate the mixer and sound/lighting system
- Time of the day when band will be expected to setup equipment
- Dress code desired for performers during event
- How many people will be in the audience
- That food and drink will be provided to the band at no charge
- When the deposit will be made and how much it will be
- When the final payment is to occur and how much it will be
- A list of “must-play” songs
- A replacement band and who will contact the replacement band if something tragic happens
- The right to talk to the bandleader directly (particularly if there is an agent involved)

Tip 15 – Don't wait too long to book a band that you like

Booking a band is almost like buying a house. You shop around until WHAM! The perfect fit is found! And, just like when your real estate agent tells you, "If you really like the house, you had better make an offer TODAY," you also need to book a band immediately once you find one you like.

Bands that are in-demand are often hired 12-16 months in advance. It will just be part of Murphy's Law that the date you want a band will be the same date that seemingly everyone else in the world decided to hire a band also. But, they lined up their band 3 months ago! When you find the band that will work for your event, take immediate action.

In Summary...

Hiring a band or music performer is one of the best investments you can make to rally the troops for a work function or make an impression during a dinner event or make the perfect wedding. Hire the wrong entertainment, and people see your effort as a complete waste of their time and they're looking for the exit door.

Hopefully these tips have helped to give you a guideline for finding the perfect musician or band for your event. Hopefully, you'll take a look first in the MusicMates.com musician referral directory and you'll now have some questions to ask its participants.

The final suggestion I wanted to offer is one that will assure a great performance by your band for the entire event. And, that suggestion is to pay the remaining balance of the contract before the end of the performance.

Make it easy for the band to get their money and never leave the event until after you pay the band. If a band has 3 breaks, pay them in cash or check on the second or third break.

This will give the musicians the positive reinforcement that they are performing to your expectation. And, the rest of the show will be even better because they know there will be no money hassles at 3 a.m.

Just about every musician I know has been ripped off in one way or another when it comes to getting paid. Have your contract on-hand so that everyone knows that the final payment made was the number that was agreed to.

Have a great event!

Sincerely,
Marty Dickinson
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