Event Planning from A to Z
A detailed guide for organizing a conference
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So you want to organize a conference? It's a great idea. It can be a fundraiser, a way to increase your chapter's exposure and be a service to journalists.

The following tips are designed primarily for a one-day conference. Keep in mind that it's not easy to just go from one step to another. A lot of them go on at the same time.

— Be sure you have at least two people, depending on the size of the project, who are willing to put in a lot of time. The people involved should check with their employers to be sure it's OK to take phone calls, faxes and time at work.

— Pick a tentative date. Check around to see what other events are planned for the same time you're considering. Maybe you can combine them. Or if it looks like too much competition, find another time.

— Be flexible. See how things work out. If a key speaker can't make it, and you're not too far along, consider another time that might be better.

— Consider your target audience. If you're trying to get reporters, the weekend might be best — few will be able to take time off during the week. If you want publishers, a weekday might work better.

— If possible, work around a local event — a fair, art show or other activity — that conventioneers will be able to see.

— Pick a topic. Is there a particularly hot issue? Has it been done before? Check with people who have been to other conferences lately to find out what was packed and what was empty. If there's an anniversary of a major news event, try a panel of people involved.

— Find a meeting place. Some questions to ask yourself: How many people are you expecting? How many sessions are you planning? How many meeting rooms do you need? Theater seating? Tables? Do you want to have a block of sleeping rooms? How many? Check meal prices, meeting room capacity, amount of flexibility if more (or fewer)
people show up than expected, meeting room costs, equipment prices and sleeping room charges.

— Start putting together a budget. Be realistic about the number of people who may attend. Add food, meeting room and equipment charges, plus any costs for speakers — fees, travel, hotel and meals. Figure the cost per person. Then add several dollars per person for publicity and other costs that are bound to come up. Add more if you want to make a profit.

— Check with local media and other companies active in the community to see whether they'd like to help sponsor the event.

— Set a preliminary price for the conference. Obviously, you don't want to make it too high. But a price that's too low could make people think it's not worth the trip.

— When you find a hotel, go look at the building. Be sure the meeting rooms are quiet, not next to a kitchen, restaurant or major entrance.

— Get a contact person who can handle everything, then let the dealing begin. Be prepared for high rental prices for equipment such as VCRs, televisions, screens, pointers and microphones. (Try to bring in your own. Ask colleges or businesses if they'll donate.) Many hotels may throw in some freebies to get your business. Decide whether the hotel will handle overnight room reservations.

— Start a list of people and organizations who are contributing to the conference. You'll want to include their names on a program, or recognize them in some other way during the meeting.

— Put together the program. If the program is big enough, consider assigning one person to each panel, speaker or meal. Are you going to have a panel discussion? If so, work toward diversity — print, broadcast, academics, public relations, lawyers, women and minorities. Before you approach a potential speaker, try to find out whether they have a speaking fee. What about mileage or plane fare? Traditionally, hosts pay for a night or two in a hotel. Ask speakers for biographical information.

— What time are you going to start? Don't start too early — it could turn off people planning to drive. But making something last too long into the day could deter people who want to fit in something else after
the meeting.

— Start thinking about food. Do you want coffee, danishes and orange juice before the first meeting? Coffee during a break? What kind of meal for lunch? Do you want to offer lunch?

Start putting together publicity
The word should be out at least two or three months in advance.

— Design a one-page flier. Write a news release you can send to the media. Write a shorter item for their public calendar and assignment desks.

— Room numbers and names tend to change, depending on the response to your program. Don't put them in your announcements.

— Give one address to send all registrations. This will spare confusion.

— Offer a couple of phone numbers for people to call if they have questions.

— Put the hotel's phone number on the flier. Include any special code number if there's a room discount for being involved in the meeting.

— Set a deadline. Make it at least two weeks ahead of the conference. Expect many registrations to come late.

— Although you should wait on publicity until you have a good idea of what your program will be, don't wait on one or two people who aren't sure they'll be able to come. Get the word out. This is key to your program's success.

— Send flyers and announcements to media throughout the state or region. Ask organizations to donate mailing lists or labels. Ask editors to post the flyers in their newsroom. Send your calendar item to national publications, such as Editor & Publisher. Check with SPJ headquarters to see how it can help. Try to get an announcement in local SPJ newsletters from nearby chapters. Try to get an announcement in newspaper association newsletters. Send flyers to colleges. Put up notices in journalism school hallways.

— Does your conference have a legal aspect? Check on publicity through local and state bar associations. Put up flyers in law schools.
Doing a program about the Internet? Put up flyers in college computer rooms. Are there computer publications you can use for publicity?

**Time for some housekeeping**

— Make a policy about late registrations. Will you charge more? If so, how will you keep track? How will you enforce it? Will you accept payment at the door?

— Make a policy about refunds. Warning: If the hotel is expecting a certain number of people for a meal, they'll charge you even if the food is not eaten. This can make a big dent in your bottom line.

— Be prepared for special requests. Some people will ask for receipts. Others will want to pull out because of emergencies. Some will want to substitute one person for another. Sometimes a company will send a check for a certain number of people, but a different number will come. Some will want special meals.

— Keep in touch with the hotel. If you're getting more registrations than you expected, the hotel might be able to switch your accommodations with another group's meeting. Keep in mind that registrations will trickle until the deadline, then pour in. Try not to panic.

Keep working on your meal and/or snack plans. If costs are running too high, ask if you can cut the danishes in half. Skip orange juice — it's expensive. Were your predictions about the amount of coffee accurate? Be sure to ask the hotel to have some "on standby;' just in case you run out. This part of the decision-making will continue through the day of the conference.

Finalize details about room setups. Is the room you planned on using too big? Can you add a partition so it doesn't seem so empty? Can you put in more chairs to fit more people? If things aren't working out as planned, consider juggling the day's schedule. How big is the registration table? Where will it go? How many chairs will be there? Arrange to have a trash can there.

Make sure the hotel knows what equipment you'll need. Make sure your budget is holding up. If you insist that you can't afford a few things, the hotel might agree to waive a fee or two, especially on equipment. Don't be afraid to ask for discounts.
— Confirm details with your speakers in writing. Tell them what's expected of them. Give them information about others on their panel and include all their telephone numbers. Tell them what costs you're covering. Make sure you know their travel plans, including flight numbers. Ask if they need material copied, or if they need equipment such as a slide projector. Be sure you have biographical information. Do they want to meet with others on the panel before the conference? Let them know who to contact with questions or concerns. Give them the contact person's telephone numbers where they can be reached while in town.

— Double-check who is keeping track of each panelist's needs, whether it's transportation from the airport or copies of material to be passed out at the conference. Be prepared for late planes, lost material and other unexpected problems.

— Put together registration packets. The local convention and visitors' bureau usually can provide maps, magazines and other publications to give people ideas for things to do. Some large stores or malls might offer coupons.

Ask SPJ headquarters for recruitment material. You might want to include a list of chapter contacts in the region.

— Prepare a brief questionnaire about the conference so you can get feedback later.

— Get name tags. Find folders or bags for all the material. Buy some extras for walk-up registrants.

— Things will move much more smoothly on the day of the conference if everything is prepared in advance. Put all the materials you've gathered inside the folder, then put the registrant's name on the front. Add some kind of removable mark on the front of folders for people who haven't paid. Alphabetize the folders.

— Figure out who will make introductions on the day of the conference and who will make sure each session begins (somewhat) on time.

— The day before the conference, try to take all the registration materials to the hotel. As speakers arrive, make sure they haven't changed their minds about needing equipment or copies of handouts.
— Check the room(s). Is it set up the way you wanted? Are there enough chairs? Water? Pencils? Is the equipment you wanted in place? Does it work? How's the room temperature? How can you change it during the meeting? Is the room bright enough? Too dark? Where are the light switches? Is another group making too much noise? Are the people in the kitchen making noise?

— Make sure things are running on schedule. It's the organizer's job to step in and break up a meeting that's running too late.

— Look ahead to the next block of meetings. Are the rooms ready?

— It's over, right? Well, not quite. It's always a nice touch to send thank you notes to speakers and others who contributed their time, resources or money.

— You also still need to balance the books. Ask organizers to turn in expense receipts by a certain date. You also might have to chase people who attended, but didn't pay.

— And finally, be sure to share your experiences with other chapters.

### Event Planning Checklist

Here are some steps for easy event planning.

— Create a checklist for each event. You may want to include an evaluation form on the back so you can keep track of how the event went.
— Require each board member to plan an event. Try to match the board member with a subject he or she is interested in.
— Bring in an event planner to train chapter board members
— Include maps of event locations in all promotional materials. Also, directional signs on site are a bonus.
— Do a mental walk-through prior to the event. It's a good idea to arrive early, an hour or so, to check out the event facility.
— Never use a facility sight unseen
— Start your planning. It's never too early.
— Vary meeting sites. Different locations tend to attract different people. If you have a meeting with an official, meet on their turf. For example, a round table discussion with the governor could be held in the governor's conference room.
— Give student members free admission in exchange for help setting up. Charge students a lower, flat rate ($5) to encourage their
attendance.
— Make use of retirees as volunteers.
— Seek media sponsors to underwrite the cost of the program
— The more unusual the subject of the program, the better. If it's an ordinary subject, think of a sexy name.
— Try to include a "happy hour" or "mixer" time so students and pros can interact.