

MAKING MEALS MEMORABLE

A GUIDE TO AFTER DINNER
ENTERTAINMENT
FOR THE CORPORATE MARKET

By Ian Keable

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Acknowledgement

With thanks to all the agents, event managers, companies, associations and individuals who have booked me over the years. Without their continuous support none of this could have been written.

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INTRODUCTION	5
SECTION 1: USING AFTER DINNER ENTERTAINMENT	6
When Appropriate	6
Advantages	6
SECTION 2: BOOKING THE ACT	7
Entertainment Must Come First	7
Two Types Of After Dinner Act	7
Choice Of Act	9
Comedian	9
Speciality	9
Musical	10
Mini-Show	10
Celebrities	10
How To Find An Act	11
Word Of Mouth	11
Direct Advertising	11
Agents	12
Managers	13
How Much?	13
SECTION 3: BEST USE OF THE ACT	15
Prepare In Advance	15
Sound System	16
Staging	17
Lighting	17
When To Go On	18
Length Of Act	19
Introduction	19
Anticipating Problems	20
Drink	21
Distractions	21
Heckling	21
APPENDIX CHECK LIST	
The Act	22
Sound	22
Lighting	22
Staging	23
Introduced	23
Timings	23

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INTRODUCTION

“With after dinner entertainment you don’t need a show, you need an act.”

The following are some guidance notes on booking after dinner entertainment for your corporate function. The first section considers why you might want after dinner entertainment; the second what sort of act to book and how to set about it; and the final section how to get the best out of your act at the event itself.

Discos or bands are not considered in this report, although some of the comments made may be applicable to them. Also outside the remit are pre-dinner, or during dinner, entertainment. These include caricaturists, close-up magicians, tarot card readers, strolling jugglers, silhouette cutters, mime acts and comedy waiters: all of these tend to target small groups of people. Alternatively they can be called background entertainment as guests can decide whether they want to interact with them or not.

They differ from the entertainer who performs for, and requires the attention of, the whole audience: which is what will be considered here.

I hope you enjoy it and find it instructive and useful. If you have any questions or comments please get in touch.

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SECTION 1: USING AFTER DINNER ENTERTAINMENT

This section looks at when after dinner entertainment is suitable and its benefits.

WHEN APPROPRIATE

“The client had to choose between booking me and the fish course. They chose the fish course!”

At virtually any corporate function, after dinner entertainment can be on the agenda. The event might be for employees, clients, customers, spouses and partners, directors, advisers, conference attendees or industry associations. It might be following a customer function, sales conference, staff meeting, road show, dealer event, celebratory meal, training day, Christmas party, trade show, supplier meeting, award dinner, new product launch or a convention. It might be in recognition of hard work, as a celebration, as a means of relaxation or as an incentive.

The number of people attending the event has no bearing on whether after dinner entertainment is appropriate. There are some acts that work very well for twenty people – and others who are comfortable in front of 1,000.

ADVANTAGES

The advantages of after dinner entertainment are:

- It proves that those invited are considered important enough to have something extra spent on them over and above the cost of the food and drink;
- It transforms the meal into more of an event and makes it particularly memorable for those attending;
- It sells or promotes the dinner to people you want to be there.
- It acts as a pleasant surprise. Everybody knows they will be eating at a meal – they do not necessarily expect to be entertained as well.
- It rounds off the evening rather than people drifting away after the coffee;
- It assists in bringing everybody together as a group with a shared experience and a common talking point.
- It may be the only option as an added attraction when the vast majority of the audience are of the same sex: a disco or band would not be suitable.

Although it is hard to directly measure the benefits of an after dinner entertainer, the goodwill that is generated and the perceived generosity of the host in providing it, invariably compensates for any financial outlay.

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SECTION 2: BOOKING THE ACT

Okay, you have decided you want some sort of after dinner entertainment. But what sort? And how should you go about booking them?

ENTERTAINMENT MUST COME FIRST

“I realised that nobody really cares about the skill as they do about just sitting there and laughing. The juggler who’s entertaining to me is one who tells jokes.”

In making a decision to book an after dinner act, the over-riding consideration should be: are they entertaining? People do not want earnest lectures or recitations from Shakespearian tragedies after dinner. There are functions which are specifically geared up for work or business related addresses: this is fine so long as those attending are aware of that in advance. Guests do not want to feel trapped or tricked into listening to a serious talk when they have just enjoyed a good meal.

The exception perhaps is when a well known personality, or somebody who has achieved something outstanding, is speaking. Just hearing their story, or anecdotes about their life, might be sufficiently appealing to hold an audience’s attention.

If you feel obliged to make the participants attending your meal listen to a humourless speech, then keep it as short as possible. Remember that after a few drinks the chances of anybody retaining much of what is said is minimal. Better still, think about re-scheduling it. Power point presentations, announcement of results, motivational talks and new strategy pronouncements should be confined to the daytime or pre-dinner agenda.

TWO TYPES OF AFTER DINNER ACT

“I never rely on anyone in the audience because a lot of times I have to work to an empty house.”

The choice for after dinner entertainment essentially falls into two broad areas: an After Dinner Speaker or a Cabaret Act. From now on the word ‘act’ will cover both categories.

After Dinner Speakers comprise:

- Comedians;
- Sports personalities;
- Celebrities;
- Those with unusual occupations; or with an unusual take on an occupation;
- Achievers and Motivators.

Cabaret Acts comprise:

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- Comedians;
- Magicians;
- Hypnotists;
- Ventriloquists;
- Jugglers;
- Mind Readers;
- Multi-instrumentalists;
- Singers.

Perhaps a little unfairly, After Dinner Speakers tend to have more kudos in the corporate market than Cabaret Acts. The reason for this is that they are more likely to be celebrities or experts in another field outside show business: indeed that is part of the appeal of booking them. Cabaret Acts, by contrast, are usually straight entertainers.

Conventionally an After Dinner Speaker has the following characteristics:

- They eat with the other guests.
- They stand up and speak at the end of the meal.
- Their speech can be serious or funny; or a combination of the two.
- They often make reference to the function or the organisation in some manner; and can (but certainly do not always) tailor their speech according to the event.
- They will dress in a similar style to the rest of the guests attending the function.
- They are usually responding to, or speaking on behalf of, some people attending the function. The connection though can be tenuous.
- They mainly speak from the table where they have been eating; although some like to walk around the room.

Cabaret Acts traditionally:

- Do not eat or socialise with the guests prior to their performance.
- Have their own area where they perform, which is away from the tables.
- Can use props and display skills other than just talking and telling jokes.
- May have a distinctive costume.
- Concentrate wholly on being entertaining and doing their act 'as known'.
- Tend to interact more directly with the guests and often use audience participation.

In practise it can be difficult to differentiate between the two because many acts are quite capable of doing both. A comedian can probably do his act in the form of speech or as a cabaret: the chances are that the performance in both cases would be the same. However with some acts it is clear what category they fall into. A juggler could hardly be deemed an After Dinner Speaker. And some speakers, particularly of a serious nature, would resent being referred to as a Cabaret Act.

There is no particular advantage in booking one sort of act over the other. Both are quite capable of being equally entertaining and equally suitable for any function. The

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exception is if you want somebody to “inform” or “inspire” as well as “entertain”. In which case you would be advised to opt for an After Dinner Speaker. But as noted above, for an after dinner function “entertain” should always take priority.

CHOICE OF ACT

Comedian

“And the last rule is there are no rules. No one can tell you how to be funny”.

The most popular after dinner entertainer, whether as a speaker or cabaret, is a comedian. Everybody knows what to expect with a comedian: somebody who stands up and is funny. However they come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Some comedians tell standard jokes; some write their own material; some concentrate on personalities in the company; some are a little risqué; and some pride themselves on being squeaky clean.

Some specialise in certain groups (golf days for instance); some are suitable for International audiences; some are fairly regional in taste; some use amusing props and plenty of audience participation; some interweave jokes with their subject matter; some just tell non-connecting gags; some are young and trendy and come from the comedy clubs; some have been around for years and used to work the social clubs; some are more famous in other fields; some are celebrities in their own right.

Humour is a personal thing and an offensive joke to one person can be hilarious to somebody else. Nevertheless there is no excuse these days to permit racist or homophobic material. Just remember that it only needs one remark to upset one person to ruin an entire evening or, worse still, lose a client: so be careful with your choice.

Speciality

“If somebody comes up to me and says, ‘hey, I’m gonna take up ventriloquism’, my immediate thought is: have you eliminated every other possibility for a hobby?”

These cover such entertainers as Magicians, Impressionists, Mind Readers, Hypnotists, Ventriloquists and Jugglers. And they can come in as many different shades as comedians. Take magicians for instance: you can have illusionists (who perform large tricks, normally involving assistants in boxes), manipulative acts (who perform silently to music, linking rings and producing doves), straight patter acts (who perform small magic but generally without a great deal of humour) and comedy magic acts (who can be funny through amusing props, situations, jokes, audience participation or a combination of all of these).

Some speciality acts do have certain restrictions. A juggler might find it difficult to work in a room with a very low ceiling. A hypnotist will require a minimum number of people

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in the audience. Some illusionists have to be properly staged and have very specific lighting.

Booking a speciality act is probably safer than booking a comedian: in the sense that they are less likely to upset anybody through inappropriate language, material or insulting somebody in the audience. You may not enjoy jugglers: but watching somebody throwing clubs in the air whilst riding a unicycle is unlikely to cause offence.

Musical

Straight singers are rarely used at corporate events – unless it is part of a show. Instead it will normally be multi-instrumentalists or novelty music acts; or singers who write parody songs or amusing songs in their own right.

Mini-Show

There is no reason why a mini show might not be laid on as the after dinner entertainment. If this happens then you would normally have two or three acts together with a compere to host the show. The compere would probably be a comedian. The other acts might be a singer, a speciality act and another comedian to close. It is quite possible to combine an After Dinner Speaker with a Cabaret Act. A common format is for a speech by a sports personality to be followed by a comedian.

Celebrities

“He cost us £15,000 and he only spoke for twenty minutes. He was on the road back up the M1 before we had finished our liqueurs.”

Acts are occasionally booked because you have seen them on the television or they are well known personalities. Nothing wrong with that so long as you know the reason you are booking them. It might be just because the celebrity is somebody who the Managing Director’s wife is very keen to meet. It is a legitimate enough reason: but look upon any other benefit you get from their attendance as an unexpected bonus.

Of course if you are using the celebrity to persuade people to attend the event, perhaps as a money raising exercise or to get potential clients to come along, then he or she will almost certainly earn their not inconsiderable fee. If their mere presence is sufficient to achieve this, then fine.

However if you are booking them to produce outstanding entertainment then you have to be a little more cautious. Just because somebody is very funny as a quiz show panellist does not necessarily mean they are automatically a good stand-up comedian. Someone who is very relaxed as a television presenter is not necessarily a good speaker. In booking a celebrity around 4/5th of the fee is for their name, only 1/5th a probable measurement of the entertainment provided. This means you could probably book a comparative unknown for 1/5th of the fee of the celebrity and the audience would

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be equally entertained.

There are of course exceptions. There are some personalities who are well known for being first class corporate entertainers. For those who are more of an unknown quality, be prepared for possible disappointment. Bottom line is that as much research is required on celebrities, as it is for unknown acts, to identify whether they are right for your event.

HOW TO FIND AN ACT

“A given act, with certain material which has been aimed at a specific class of audience, will be most effective when performed to that audience.”

There are a number of ways of finding a suitable act for your function.

Word Of Mouth

This is clearly the best method. You know someone who has used the entertainer before and recommends them; or you have seen them yourself at another event. Just remember to make sure that the event you want to book them for is similar. If you have seen an act go down a storm in a comedy club, this does not necessarily mean that the same act will be suitable for your sales conference. Similarly an act that is a hit at a stag function, will not necessarily be right for your employee and partners dinner.

The number in the audience can also enter the equation: some acts are great with small groups but struggle badly with large crowds. If in doubt follow up in the same way as you would for an unknown act as detailed below.

Direct Advertising

You could decide to choose an act from the Yellow Pages (although few after dinner entertainers advertise in this), by googling the Internet and looking at web sites, responding to some publicity through the post or by following up an advertisement in a magazine like the Corporate Entertainment Directory. Making the right choice from these sources is hard: as clearly somebody's own publicity is only going to be singing their praises. The following pointers should assist you in your decision:

- Get testimonial letters from the act for similar events to which you are organising.
- Ask for the name of somebody they have worked for who you could speak to direct.
- Check if their publicity is corporate orientated. There are notable exceptions but if somebody performs at children parties they are less likely to be right for a room full of tough salesmen. Look at their web site. Acts tend to highlight their principle market.
- Make sure their act is appropriate. A magician who is a superb close-up performer is not necessarily a good Cabaret Act.

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- Cost can be a guideline. If it is very low, this should ring alarm bells. Get the act to state how much they charge without giving away your own budget. If an act knows you had Jimmy Carr last year, their fee tends to go up! However the converse is not true. Just because an act charges a lot does not necessarily mean they are the right act for your event.
- Note the type of questions the act asks. Do they sound as if they are familiar with corporate events generally?

There are a couple of what would seem obvious ways of assessing an act's capabilities which are not necessarily right.

- Relying on video footage as a means of determining whether an act is suitable. With judicial editing even the worst act in the world can look great on film. Furthermore somebody might have some superb television footage; but it is worth asking the question as to whether what appeals to a television audience also appeals to a corporate one?
- Requesting to see the act work first before booking them. This can be tough for the act as it might be hard to find an event which is suitable for you to come along to. And remember that many acts change their material dependent on the function. It would be unfair to judge whether an act would be suitable for an all male association dinner on the basis of seeing them at a wedding anniversary party.

Agents

"Advice from one act to another on how to get on in show business: 'get a good agent!'"

If you do not have any personal recommendation for, or direct contact with, an act, then it is best to go to an agent. A reputable agent will recommend an appropriate act. It is not in their interest to do otherwise as clearly they want to do more business with you. They will want some sort of budget from you and the type of act you are looking for. They will then send you a list of acts which fulfil your criteria.

The best way to check out an agent is the same way that you might check out an act. Ask for their brochure and which other companies have used their services. Many agents specialise in private parties, weddings or social club shows. There is a huge difference between booking an act for a holiday camp and a sales conference. Make sure the agent you choose are geared up for corporate entertainment.

An agent will offer you acts they have on their books. This means they should have used that act before and have had good feedback from their existing clients. If you are a little uncertain exactly what the act does, and whether they are right for your function, it can be constructive to ask if you can speak directly to the act. The agent might be slightly wary of this because they think you might by-pass them and book the act direct. However a professional would never countenance this: particularly if they want more work from the agent.

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Managers

People often do not know the difference between an agent and a manager. A manager is responsible for all bookings for an individual act. If you, or the agent you engage, want to book that act you *have* to go through the manager. Not all acts are managed: in fact the majority are not. The better known the act, the more likely they are to be managed.

An agent, on the other hand, will have a number of different acts on their books: they are not responsible for those acts beyond any individual job they get for them. Non managed acts want to be on the books of as many agents as they can: this increases the likelihood of them getting work. This is the reason that if you shop around different agents, the same acts might be recommended.

HOW MUCH?

“My average fee is £X.” “That’s a lot of money for an average fee.” “Well, you are the first who has reached the average.”

When booking direct with an after dinner entertainer, price is a matter of negotiation with that individual act. A professional act should have a set fee: it may fluctuate depending on the time of year (for some acts December is a busy month and they can afford to push their fees up). But by and large it should remain broadly consistent. Having said that most acts will be prepared to accept a lower payment from time to time; so it’s certainly worth trying to negotiate a reduced fee if the amount quoted exceeds your budget.

The same basis of negotiation will work with agents. However you should be aware how agents operate. Agents pay acts in one of two ways. Either on a ‘buy sell’ basis; or commission.

Under the commission basis, whatever the agent charges you they will take a commission – normally around 15%: and pay the net figure to the act. You pay £X, the agent takes 20% of X and the act gets £X less 20%. In this type of deal, the contracts to both you and the act will clearly state the commission the agent is receiving. This is clearly more transparent as all parties know how much they are paying and receiving.

The ‘buy sell’ method means the agent will ‘buy’ the act for a certain price (whatever it is that the act charges) and ‘sell’ the act onto you (whatever price you are prepared to pay). The difference between the buy and the sell price represents the mark up for the agent. In this type of deal the act will not be aware of how much you are paying for them; and you will not know how much they are being paid.

Although the vast majority of agents are honest and fair in their dealings, there are some around who might be tempted to take a disproportionately large mark up under

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the 'buy sell' arrangement. If you are at all concerned that you are being substantially overcharged for an act, then it might be worth asking the act directly what they are receiving. Or alternatively ask another agent to check out the act's price. Of course this should be done before contracts are signed and exchanged.

By going to an agent you are getting their professional expertise in recommending the right act for your event. And for this service it is right they should earn a fee. Do not assume that just because you go to an agent you are always going to pay more for the act than you would if you booked them direct. This is because:

- Some acts deliberately offer a discount to the agent; so that the price charged by the agent after their mark up, is similar to what the act would charge direct.
- Agents have more clout in asking an act to accept a reduced price than perhaps you do. If an act regularly works for an agent, they are more likely to accept a reduction in their usual fee.

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SECTION 3: BEST USE OF THE ACT

“There’s no theatre, there’s no band, there’s no dressing room; but even though it’s not real show business, it ain’t bad.”

Having booked your act you want to make quite sure you get the best out of them. Equally it is in their interest to do the best possible job for you. This section considers how you can both help each other.

PREPARE IN ADVANCE

If at all possible speak directly to the act before the event: even if you have booked the act through a third party. Unfortunately what you tell your agent does not always get passed onto the act. And the act’s requests also sometimes do not get through to yourself. The more managers, agents, PR companies, event organisations and other associations between yourself and the act, the more likely there will be a communication breakdown. You are paying for the act so it is a reasonable request to ask to speak to them in advance.

This might not always be possible, particularly if the act is a well known personality and the management company wants to protect their client from speaking to you. In which case put it clearly in writing what you are expecting: with clear instructions that it is to be forwarded to the act you have booked.

Information you want to know from the act is:

- Their Schedule of Requirements (this should include the type of microphone and stand they want, whether staging and lighting is needed; and any other additional needs: more about these below). The better known the act, the chance are the more demanding will be the Schedule of Requirements. Do make sure the act’s requirements are appropriate to the event. If there are only 50 in attendance, does the act really need a bank of lighting and a follow spot?
- Whether they require refreshments and a changing area.
- What time they are intending to arrive.

Information the act might want from you:

- Clarification of exactly what you are expecting from them: just to reiterate the point it is surprising how often details get lost when an intermediary passes on messages. Basic mistakes, like you are expecting an After Dinner Speaker and instead you get a Cabaret Act, can occur.
- Who they should contact initially at the venue.
- Some information about the company or association and the event.
- How many are attending the function.
- How long you are expecting them to perform or speak for.

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- Type of dress: black tie, suit or smart casual to be worn by the attendees.

Even if all of the above is clearly stated on the contract, it is still worth touching base with each other prior to the event. For instance if the act needs to bring in a lot of equipment, then they might need to get to the venue earlier than the time of arrival stated. Also there might be last minute changes to the function details that the act needs to know about.

SOUND SYSTEM

“If I can be seen by everyone and heard by everyone, then I am half-way there.”

Whatever the act they will require a sound system of some sort. This comprises speakers, an amplifier and a microphone. The majority of acts expect this to be provided. The different microphone options are as follows:

- Hand held mike. These are the large mikes that an act will hold in their hand, place in a stand or have in a sling around their neck.
- Lapel clip mike. These are small in size and just clip onto the lapel or tie. It is the type of mikes that television presenters wear.
- Headset mike. These are held in place with a headband around the neck with the mike attached coming out near the mouth. Popular with pop singers who leap all over the stage.

Unless requested otherwise, always provide a hand held mike. They can be radio controlled or with a lead. All professional acts will be able to cope with these. If the act talks, then the microphone wants to be omni-directional: which means it will pick up your voice whichever way you are facing. With a uni-directional microphone, you have to talk directly into it to get the sound.

It is worth finding out if the act requires a mike stand. This is not, as the name might suggest, a microphone bolted to a standing podium: which are used by people giving lectures or presentations. These are not right for after dinner entertainment, even for after dinner speeches. A mike stand has a round, or three legged, base with a pole that goes up and down. It has a clip at the top for the microphone to be placed into. If the after dinner speaker is talking from the table, then a shortened mike stand resting on the table might be appropriate.

Do not necessarily rely on the hotel or function sound system, especially if the speakers are inbuilt into the walls or ceiling. Often these are only designed for giving lectures and presentations and are not robust enough for a professional after dinner entertainer. With the latter they have to handle much more volume as they will be talking over laughs (hopefully!) and other extraneous noise. Double check with the hotel in question: and if in any doubt ask the hotel, or your event organiser, to book an outside sound system.

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STAGING

“At all costs try to avoid the situation where you are stuck at one end of the room and the audience are at the other. That can be death to any act, however good they are.”

The vast majority of acts prefer to be as close to their audience as they possibly can. No act likes a huge expanse of dance floor between themselves and the first set of tables. Given this situation, many acts will opt to work on the dance floor instead of the stage.

The best place for an act is to be as central as possible with their back to the wall. It is better to be in the centre of the long side of a rectangular room than in the centre of one of the shorter sides. This is because they want all the tables to be as close to them as possible. No act, even a comedian, likes to work completely surrounded: it is difficult to engage with your audience if you have your back to them.

If an act has to be seen – which applies to all acts really apart from the stand-up comedian (and even they prefer to be seen!) – then it may be necessary to provide some sort of platform. As a rough rule of thumb:

- If there are between 100 and 200 people attending, then the platform should be about one foot high.
- Between 300 and 500 people the platform should be two feet high.
- For 700 people or more, the platform needs to be three feet high.

Quite often staging will be organised for the band and the Cabaret Act is forgotten about. Staging may therefore have to be erected especially for the act in the middle of the dance floor. Most large hotels have staging on the premises which can be very quickly wheeled in and out of the room.

LIGHTING

If an act requires special lighting then it is their responsibility to organise it. Most acts are capable of working with whatever lighting the function room or hotel provides. There is a saying in show business that when an act is asked what they require, they will state: “microphone on, lighting on and audiences in”. If there are spot lights available then the act might want to use these. Lighting should always be from the front, focusing on the act. No act wants spot lights behind them as this just casts a shadow over them.

WHEN TO GO ON

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“When your host says, ‘...and now in conclusion’, you will have about twenty minutes to go to the bathroom before you are introduced.”

The best time for an act to go on is at the end of the meal: as soon after the desert has finished as possible. Ideally the staff will clear the dessert dishes, coffee and liqueurs will be served and then they will leave the room. This is the right moment for the after dinner entertainment to begin. The later you leave it, the more likely people are to get restless and wander off.

It is a standing joke amongst most acts that they nearly always go on later than stated in their contract. The reasons for this can be numerous:

- People are late in arriving, so dinner is delayed.
- It takes longer than anticipated to get everybody seated.
- The hotel staff are slow in clearing dishes or people are tardy in eating: this is exacerbated by the general rule which seems to prevail of apparently not starting to clear the dishes until the very last person has finished their very last morsel.
- The kitchen is overrun by orders and there are delays between the courses.
- Somebody decides to make an impromptu speech in the middle of the meal.
- The person arranging the timetable has been unduly optimistic.

The only time this could cause a problem with the act is if they are ‘doubling up’ that night: in other words they have to go off to do another show. In which case they can insist on going on as stated in their contract. This is another reason for speaking to an act before the event to ensure they are flexible as to their exact timings.

Under no circumstances should you have some disco or dancing first and then bring the act on afterwards. People do not like to be stopped in mid dancing, made to sit down and watch the entertainment.

Acts do not like to go on just after the audience have been too hyped up. If you are offering some wonderful awards to employees or promising them a free trip to the Caribbean, best to do that after the act has been on or earlier in the evening.

LENGTH OF ACT

“A good 45 minute act seems like they have done 15; a bad 15 minute act seems like they have done 45.”

The majority of speeches last between 20 and 30 minutes; the majority of cabarets

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between 30 and 45 minutes. As a generalisation the larger the audience the shorter the act needs to be. Cabaret Acts tend to do longer because they offer more variety (for instance audience participation) to break up the possible monotony of somebody just talking. Most acts prefer to know how long they are required to do before they start. Contrary to belief acts do not welcome comments such as: “do as long as you feel comfortable with”; “you’re the professional, you will know when the audience have had enough”; and “if it’s going well, just carry on.”

There is a good rule in show business: always leave your audience wanting more. If some acts do have a fault, it is to outstay their welcome. Far better to state up front how long you want them to do.

If you have company speeches and presentations before the main act be particularly careful of your timings. The longest any audience really want to sit without moving is around an hour. Therefore if you have speeches and presentations that last for 45 minutes – and then straightway introduce the main act who you expect to do another 45 minutes – they may encounter a restless audience.

One way of overcoming this is to break it up. Perhaps do some of the presentations between the courses. Maybe have a comfort break after the awards and come back for the speeches and main act afterwards.

Announcing a comfort break before the after dinner entertainment is about to begin is a good device for making sure everybody is relaxed before the entertainment begins. It is always best to state a specific time when parties should return to their seats: comfort breaks tend to stretch interminably.

INTRODUCTION

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve got an act here that I don’t think is going to be any good; but we’ve paid for it so we might as well have it anyway.”

All acts need to be introduced. At some events there will be a Master Of Ceremonies or compere who will know exactly what to do. Failing that, it is preferable if somebody from your company introduces the act. Do not use a member of the hotel staff or allow the DJ to make the introduction. The reason for this is that your guests may think it is an outsider who has provided the entertainment; and therefore not be so respectful towards the act. By making it clear that your organisation has booked the entertainment, the act will receive more attention.

The person who introduces the act has a number of responsibilities.

- To get everybody seated;
- To get everybody to shut up;
- To get everybody to face where the entertainment is to take place;
- To get everybody to anticipate they are about to see somebody special.

Making Meals Memorable

The introducer is also under an obligation not to try and upstage the after dinner entertainer. There are some people in some organisations who are very amusing speakers in their own right. But it is hardly fair to show off these skills just before introducing the paid comedian. The company person has lots of advantages in being funny; firstly the expectations of the audience are not so high; and secondly he knows the personnel well and therefore can make plenty of in-jokes. If you, or somebody else, wants to display your skills at stand-up comedy, then why book a professional?

It is always worth asking an act how they want to be introduced. Some will give you a card stating what they want said. It is better if you follow the wording exactly if that is the case. Most acts prefer a short and punchy introduction rather than a long list of their achievements. If an act insists on you reading out a complete biographical spiel then tactfully suggest that the audience have come to hear them, not you.

When an act has finished, somebody needs to take them off. All that is required are a few words: thank the act and tell the audience what happens next so they are not left sitting around wondering if anything else is about to take place. For instance: "the bar will remain open until midnight – so please feel free to stay and enjoy yourself." If there is a band or disco straight after the act, then it is quite acceptable to segue straight into that after the act has finished. The DJ can then thank the act as they play the first record.

Some acts like to have an encore or a false tab. This means they expect someone to come on after their performance has apparently finished and 'persuade' them to come back and do some more. It is worth checking to see if the act wants this.

ANTICIPATING PROBLEMS

*"I did some jokes in Israel and they loved me. Same jokes in Palestine – nothing!"
Jackie Mason*

The vast majority of acts are thoroughly professional and are quite capable of dealing with normal interruptions. Mild comments from audience members, people going to the toilet in the middle of their act and waiting staff refilling coffee cups: all these they should be able to take in their stride. There are certain interruptions though that any act might have problems with.

Drink

It is virtually impossible for anybody to entertain an audience who have had too much to drink. Most people in an organisation are sensible and do not drink to excess. The best way of dealing with this is to try and anticipate if there could be a problem. For instance an all day free bar is probably not recommended.

Making Meals Memorable

Distractions

It is only fair to the act that there are as little distractions for the audience as possible; so they can concentrate their attentions on the act. If there is a bar at the back of the room, this should be closed whilst the act is on. At Christmas parties try to ensure that the crackers, flying balloons and party poppers have been fully pulled, flown and popped. On no account should anybody be still eating their main meal when the entertainment begins. Disco lights and other lit up areas which are not directly relevant to the act should be extinguished.

Heckling

Heckler to multi-instrumentalist: "Is there no end to his man's versatility?"

It does happen from time to time that somebody at the event will decide to heckle aggressively. An act can be expected to take only so much abuse. If it gets too much some acts might even leave the stage and refuse to continue.

It is possible that the heckling might arise because the act is not going well: in show business this is known as 'dying'. Rest assured this is a far more unpleasant experience for the act than it is for the audience. In all probability an act will cut their expected performing time.

However if you have followed all the advice in this report, this should not happen!

APPENDIX CHECK LIST

The following is a list of what needs to be checked or confirmed once you have booked an act.

The Act

Making Meals Memorable

Are both you and the act certain what they are booked to do?	Y	N
Is the act a Cabaret Act or an After Dinner Speaker?	CA	ADS
Is the act eating with the guests?	Y	N
If not, does the act require separate refreshments?	Y	N
Does the act require a changing room?	Y	N
Does the act need some advance information about:		
Event itself?	Y	N
Number attending?	Y	N
Type of guests? (company/client/male/female)	Y	N
Particular personalities?	Y	N
Dress of guests?	Y	N
What time will the act arrive?		
Who is initial contact for act at the venue?		

Sound

Is the sound system suitable for the act?	Y	N
Is a microphone required?	Y	N
Hand held mike or Lapel clip-on mike?	H	L
Is a microphone stand required?	Y	N

Lighting

Is function room lighting sufficient for the act?	Y	N
Is additional lighting required?	Y	N
If so, what type of lighting?		

Staging

Is act situated in best possible place in room for everyone to see?	Y	N
Are the first set of tables as close to the act as possible?	Y	N
Is there a dance floor between the stage & the audience	Y	N

Making Meals Memorable

If so, have you considered staging on the dance floor? Y N

How much space does the act require?

Is additional staging or platform required? Y N

If so, what stage dimensions (height, width & length)

Introduced

Who is going to introduce the act? Y N

Has the wording of the introduction been agreed? Y N

Who will thank the act at the finish? Y N

Timings

What approximate time will the act go on?

Is it after dessert, at coffee time? Y N

If not, why not!?

How long will the act last?

Will the act be doing an encore? Y N

Are there other speeches, presentations and awards? Y N

If so, what is the total time the audience will sit without breaks?

Will a comfort break be called for? Y N