

Behind the Scenes, Between Events

The Build Up, Tear Down, Build Up and Tear Down of the Windy City Fieldhouse

by Murrel Karsh

To increase attendance at meetings, conferences and charity benefits, event planners are constantly striving to offer something new and creative to their attendees. Potential attendees expect to be dazzled more than ever before if they are going to donate their time and budget dollars to attend an event. These two impenetrable facts can be a tremendous challenge for the planners and almost more so for the behind-the-scenes professionals working at these events.



While most sites routinely host large groups, the event process becomes even more complex when sequential events require a wide range of activities or extreme changes in structure and decor, all within a minimal amount of time. An example of such a successful and challenging transition was recently executed at Chicago's Windy City Fieldhouse.

On Saturday night, the Fieldhouse hosted a formal fundraiser, on Sunday, the site was the place to be for a casual, interactive multiple-activity employee event. The Lynn Sage Cancer Research Foundation's "An Evening of Promise" set the stage for a formal fundraiser with celebrity attendees and important guests dressed in their best cocktail attire. The event featured silent and live auctions, a New York-style cocktail lounge, dinner by Wolfgang Puck Catering and a high-style fashion show complete with full-sized runway. The 1,100 attendees were treated to sophisticated decor and a full-course, sit-down dinner that required 200 wait staff and support personnel.

A crew of 80 people set up tables and chairs, built the runway, assembled centerpieces, staged the lighting, decorated the entire facility and prepared the kitchen for the formal occasion. Once the event had ended, the night crew launched into action removing the glittering mobiles from the ceiling, disassembling the runway and taking out every last flower.

When the last remnants of the fundraiser had been removed, a third crew came in to set up outdoor tents, audio/visual equipment, casual decor and high-end games, activities and inflatables. Using numerous vendors and more than 100 team leaders, staff members and crew, Windy City Fieldhouse was ready and waiting for Computer Discount Warehouse's employee motivational event.

The company invited its employees to enjoy presentations and an interactive video presentation by the company president and several executives, and a day of fun that included full-sized inflatable games, pop-a-shot basketball, miniature golf, pinball machines, team activities and competitions, rock climbing and sumo wrestling.

How did Windy City Fieldhouse accomplish this seemingly insurmountable task? Following are some tips on planning consecutive events.



- 1.** Have established vendor relationships. The Fieldhouse considers its vendors as partners. Because the site works with the same companies, the vendors already know the site's layout, limitations and expectations. Make sure everyone understands their role in the event's execution.
- 2.** Make sure there will be enough well-trained staff, and that they are the best at what they do. The Fieldhouse keeps its staff enthusiastic and minimizes mistakes by breaking shifts into realistic segments, and conducts brief meetings before the event to get new staff up to speed on what has been done and still needs doing.
- 3.** Plan for emergencies. Expect the best, but plan for the worst. Build contingency plans and checklists into the event's strategy. Have back-up plans for potential problems with vendors, suppliers and the facilities.
- 4.** Be flexible. Don't be afraid to change the plan midstream if the original one doesn't end up working out. With the Lynn Sage event, the site switched the event's layout at the last minute to create a tighter, more nightclub-looking atmosphere.

Murrel Karsh is president and co-founder of Windy City Fieldhouse, a 55,000-square-foot, multi-use facility that offers a full spectrum of event services for teambuilding events, formal and casual catered events, interactive picnics and formal conferences and meetings. For more information, call (773) 486-7300 or visit www.windycityfieldhouse.com.