



By
Maura Keller

GigSalad staff with the Kamikaze Fireflies. GigSalad provides every and any type of entertainment for corporate events.

Creative, Memorable Ways to Wow Award-Winners on Their Night

Traditional awards banquets and galas held within the financial and insurance arena often tend to be boring, repetitive experiences for attendees and award-ees alike. We often equate them to a high school graduation where the names of the winners are read, and then the winner is paraded in front of their peers to receive their diploma. In many instances, attendees only pay attention when their name or the names of their friends is read, and then everyone goes back to socializing and drinking the table wine. In most cases, the awards banquet comes across as a “stuffy possession of names” as opposed to a celebration of the company’s top performers. So how are financial and insurance planners modifying today’s award galas and entertainment?

According to Karen Alfonso, CMP, director of conference planning at The Hartford Financial Services Group in Hartford, Connecticut, the main objective of an awards gala is to reward and recognize someone for a job well done. However, the objective always is to do so in a powerful and personal way.

“Find out interesting, meaningful facts about the award-winner(s) and weave the details into the award presentation,” Alfonso says.

She sees the trends of enhanced

emphasis not only on cost-savings but also event value. If it’s not going to provide a lasting, memorable experience, refrain from doing it.

“Are there different interests of people attending that you are trying to meet?” Alfonso says. “We find that whether or not attendees are seasoned award-winners or first-time winners, everyone likes to feel appreciated and recognized. No matter what the budget, the key is to create an emotional, memorable connection between the company presenting the

award and the person(s) receiving it. We also find this to be an effective way to inspire others to achieve and exceed their goals.”

Go the Creative and Cost-Effective Route

Internally, the Hartford Financial Service Group is placing less of an emphasis on expensive décor. Rather, Alfonso and her team seek creative and cost-effective ways to create a “wow experience.” For example, they produced an opening video to



to say we 'have fun with' the people and not 'make fun of.' Our job is to make the top performers shine as we celebrate their accomplishments."

Ahearn created such an event with their client MetLife — incorporating live, improvised songs about the winners, using funny introductions to spice up the procession of winners and interviewing winners to add levity to the night.

"Our goal is to keep the night moving in a fun and innovative way so that by the end, people are longing for more as opposed to looking at their watches hoping for the night to end," Ahearn says.

"We create a night that everyone will talk about for months or even years after the night has passed," Ahearn says. "We encourage companies not to make the awards night an afterthought. Instead, make it one of the best moments of your conference."

Mark Steiner, CEO of GigSalad, notes a trend that one must continually surpass past events. However, bigger and splashier is not always better.

"Sometimes the subtlety of a performance in entertainment is missed," Steiner says. "You don't have to go bigger; choose quality talent for a couple of hours instead of long hours of mediocrity. Break out of the box and be diverse in your choices for entertainment."

Steiner stresses that flow and timing are essential in keeping these events engaging and entertaining. "Not losing track of audience patience and attention span is of utmost importance," Steiner says. "Audiences today have shorter attention spans and planners must keep up by adding more exciting elements to their events."

Sally Allen and the Water Coolers entertain and engage corporate audiences all the while making award-winners feel like rock stars.

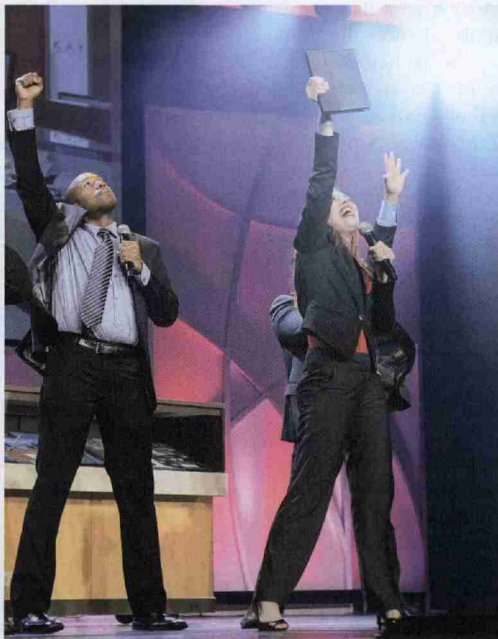


David Ahearn, Co-founder
Four Day Weekend Inc., Fort Worth, TX

stilt-walkers, strolling magicians, contortionists and other visual entertainment. If the goal is something more traditional, GigSalad suggests that music is universal.

"Try a string quartet or acoustic band for background ambience and setting a mood, or a cover band to add energy to an event," Steiner says. "Music can almost always be effective and is seldom out of place or inappropriate."

And when affordable, having a celebrity present the awards is always a lot of fun.



"Some companies on a budget will use a celebrity impersonator instead, which usually goes over just as well with the crowd," Steiner says.

Many times, as themed events are back in style, the awards follow the specific theme. For example, companies may present an Academy Award-style Oscar statue for a movie theme

"We believe the awards banquet should be a celebration of the company's greatest asset — their people."

or have the emcee walk to the award-winner in the audience and escort him/her to the stage to accept the award.

"Again, finding creative, untraditional ways to present awards makes for a much more fun experience," Alfonso says. "Isn't it much more fun to have a unique award in your office that will generate conversation?"

Meeting the Challenge

It's always been challenging to keep people engaged at awards programs, especially when award-winner may be self-conscious and uncomfortable walking across a stage. And more often than not, the session is hosted by an executive, and unless the executive has the time to spend days preparing, like a professional host would, it's almost impossible for him or her to keep the session on pace.

"These days attendees have access to everyone they know and all the information in the universe, right in their pockets," says Sally Allen, executive producer at The Water Coolers, a corporate entertainment company. "Before you know it, the entire room is checking their email, and if you stand in the back of the darkened room, it looks like stars twinkling in a sky of boredom."