

# How to Budget a Corporate Event

*The complete 2026 guide*

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## Start with the deliverable, not the number

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The most common mistake with event budgeting isn't in the maths, it's in the sequencing. Planners set the budget first, then work out what fits inside it, and end up with a compromise version of what they wanted. A more useful sequence is to define the deliverable first — what the delegate should experience, learn or leave with — and then price the elements needed to produce it. Two rounds of trimming later, that gets closer to what the client actually asked for than working from a top-down number.

The other useful reframe: an event budget is not a fixed cost model, it is a range with a confidence interval. Line items firm up as suppliers are booked and headcount is confirmed, and a budget that shows the client only the best-case number sets you up for the awkward conversation later.

## The line items planners consistently miss

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An itemised checklist saves more money than any single negotiation. These are the categories that most often surface late:

- **AV standby and overtime.** The quote usually covers the run itself. Rehearsals, early set-up and any run-over are extra.
- **Speaker travel and hosting.** Even unpaid speakers usually expect economy-class travel, one hotel night, and a car from the airport if they're flying in.
- **Room hire vs exclusive hire.** Room hire is one room. Exclusive hire buys the whole building — much more expensive but avoids clashes and gives you signage rights.
- **Delegate materials.** Lanyards, badges, printed packs, notebooks, branded merchandise. Individually small, collectively 3–5% of the total.
- **Catering upgrades.** The DDR (day delegate rate) covers standard tea, coffee, lunch. Barista coffee, prosecco reception, canapés, dietary specials all add per head.
- **Rigging and load-in.** Custom stage sets, banner rigs and floor loading beyond the venue standard usually attract a fee.
- **Payment processing.** If you're selling delegate tickets, Stripe/GoCardless fees are 1.4–2.9% of gross ticket revenue.
- **Contingency.** 10% is standard. 15% if this is your first event with the venue or the supplier list is new.

## Build the model as a range, not a point estimate

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Give every line a low, medium and high figure. The medium is your working number. The low is what you'd get if you had leverage on every negotiation. The high is what happens if the supplier list stretches and the guest count creeps. Sum the mediums and add the contingency: that's the number you present to the client.

Most spreadsheet-based event budgets are actually just totalled columns. Add a formula that shows the total of the highs alongside the total of the mediums, and you have an early warning: if the high total is more than 25% above the medium, the plan is over-specified for the budget.

## Where the negotiation actually happens

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### Venue rate

Published DDR figures are almost always the walk-in rate. For a corporate booker with a predictable pattern (say four events across the year) most operators will move on rate in return for the volume commitment. A written multi-event contract is the leverage — most venues won't discount for one event but will for four.

### AV bundle

Venues quote an AV package that assumes a standard set-up. If the event doesn't need the full package (no video, no streaming, straight talking-head content), ask for a de-scoped quote. Many AV teams will substitute a smaller mixer, drop the camera crew, and knock 30% off.

### Catering

The biggest single variable is beverages. A standing drinks reception with unlimited wine will move a per-head figure by more than the food itself. Cap the reception at 90 minutes, spec a fixed pour count (three drinks per guest), and use canapés rather than bowl food. That's typically £15-20 per head saved without visibly downgrading the event.

### Cancellation terms

Standard venue cancellation curves take 100% of the fee if you cancel inside 30 days. If the event is date-flexible, ask for a "postponement clause" rather than cancellation — most venues will accept a date move to another slot in the calendar year at no charge, which is worth having in your back pocket if numbers underperform.

## Common cost blowouts and how to defuse them

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**Guest-count creep.** The signed contract usually locks a minimum number and lets you flex up. Numbers rarely flex down. Watch the RSVP curve two weeks out — if you're pacing above the minimum, the venue is happy; if you're pacing below, ask for a downward flex now rather than paying for empty covers on the day.

**The last-minute AV request.** A speaker asks for a video wall three days out. The AV team can source it, and will, at rush pricing. Set a "no changes to spec after T-14" rule with the internal team, and treat any post-cut-off change as a chargeback to whichever budget line asked for it.

**Overnight accommodation.** A two-day conference with 200 delegates and a hotel block negotiated at £180/night — but 40 delegates upgrade to a deluxe room at their own cost, and the block minimum is missed. Read the "attrition clause" in the hotel contract: it usually charges for unmet block room-nights at up to 90% of the rate. Book the block conservatively and hold-over the extras rather than the other way round.

## What Cavendish's finance team sees most often

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Across the venues at Cavendish, the two most common budget corrections after the initial quote go out are (1) upward on catering, once dietary requirements are firmed up and the drinks reception scope lands, and (2) upward on AV once the presentation format is confirmed. Both are avoidable if the brief specifies scope in the first pass. A single line — *"delegates: 200; format: hybrid, with 30 remote joiners on Zoom; catering: standard DDR + drinks reception 6-7:30pm, 3 drinks per head"* — cuts most of the back-and-forth.

## A workable template

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A serviceable event budget model has five columns: *line item, quantity, unit price, total, notes*. Group the lines by category (venue, catering, AV, production, speakers, marketing, delegate experience, contingency) and use

a summary row at the top that pulls the category totals. Colour-code confirmed vs estimated numbers so both you and the client can see at a glance which lines are firm.

Reconciliation against the actual after the event is the piece almost nobody does but should. Log the final invoice numbers next to the budget figures and calculate variance per category. Do this three events in a row and you'll have a much more accurate opening budget the fourth time round.

## Frequently asked questions

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### What percentage contingency should I budget for a first-time event?

15% is the working number. Once you've run the same format twice you can drop to 10%. Below 8% is optimistic on anything with more than 100 delegates.

### Are venue day delegate rates negotiable?

The walk-in rate is fixed for one-off bookings. For a corporate booker with multiple events across the year, most venues will move on rate in return for volume commitment in a written contract.

### How do I budget for hybrid delivery on top of a physical event?

Rule of thumb: hybrid adds 20–30% to the AV line versus a physical-only event of the same size — cameras, presenter comfort monitor, remote audience feed, dedicated hybrid producer. It rarely adds anything to the venue, catering or delegate-materials lines.

### What should I ask the venue to quote for at the enquiry stage?

Room hire (or exclusive), DDR at final headcount, AV package with a clear scope statement, catering upgrades priced per head, cancellation terms, and payment terms. Any single one missing at quote stage is a common source of budget surprise later.

### Do venues charge for changes after the contract is signed?

Menu changes and delegate number flex within the contracted range are usually free up to T-14. Format changes, additional rooms or scope creep on AV attract change fees. Read the contract's "change control" clause before signing.