

How to be a very hospitable host

VERITE REILY COLLINS

explains how you could be paid to go to the BAFTA Awards, attend Wimbledon finals or dine with an MP

If you work for a Corporate Hospitality company then glamorous events are part of your working life, but you have probably been working on the scene overnight, and so busy you don't have time to see anything. Jobs in this sector are challenging, stimulating and require a "can do" attitude.

What is corporate hospitality?

Once, companies rewarded their best customers with a bottle of wine at Christmas or New Year. Not very exciting, particularly if you were teetotal. Then along came corporate hospitality, offering companies the chance to "host" invitations to events that normally their customers couldn't attend: rugby and Wimbledon finals, gala nights at the Royal Opera with dining in a private room, dinners in the Houses of Parliament and the chance to meet MPs – budget the only limit.

'Sensitive prima donnas are definitely not wanted in this sector'

Once guests have been-there-seen-it-done-it, companies look for more exciting events to reward customers – from a day's golf playing with top players, to a fun activities day at a castle hosted by the titled owner; but still keeping the exclusive angle that would be difficult for guests to arrange for themselves.

Generally, corporate hospitality days are just that – one day events. Searching for more glamorous venues means these can be abroad, but guests are invited for the day (customers' bosses might complain if they are away from work for too long). Day trips can range from duty free shopping in Gibraltar to dog



sledding in Lapland, or gourmet lunches in Lille or Brussels by Eurostar.

What does work cover?

Working in corporate hospitality, this is an outline scenario:

- The client asks your company to quote for "something extraordinary" to thank good clients
- You present ideas for a superb, exclusive and unusual day
- Client chooses one of the options
- You liaise with the client over guest list, day's events, transport, gourmet catering, special requirements, branding (company logo on airline seatbacks, napkins, etc), day's timetable, etc.
- Plan for the "what if" factor – producing a plan for everything that just might go wrong.

- Make sure everything that can be insured
- Write lists: checking and planning are vital to every process
- Change and re-write plans constantly
- Ensure everyone receives and understands instructions.
- Accompany group
- Handle wrap-up: from taking charge of lost property to writing thank-you letters
- Handle finance – checking bills and expenses before invoicing client
- Keep client in your sights for their next corporate hospitality event.

Corporate hospitality is part of event management, the "umbrella" business term in the business travel sector, which can also cover the management of product launches and various other events. Fiona Vandersluys of event

management experts Omega World Travel explains: "It is a challenge that you can go in to heart and soul, or stand on the side-lines – but that would be a mistake. You can only learn by experience – piecing together the whole picture in your mind is the best way to learn."

She agrees a "can do" attitude is important: "You might start by working as a waiter or waitress for an event caterer. If your job is to polish the table, do the best you can, and it will be noticed. Attitude is better than aptitude". American undergrads score highly – they are always smart and smiling – even if the job is clearing tables." As Ms Vandersluys points out, you only have one chance to get it right.

Qualifications

A degree, which helps to prove you can do the necessary research, vital for any event. Stamina. Ability to work hard and think on your feet – and keep your temper under control when things go wrong: good bosses know you learn by experience.

'Working as a holiday rep and learning how to handle clients at a resort is excellent training'

Sensitive *prima donnas* are definitely not wanted in this sector. Can you take it if an air traffic control strike means it is 3am before the flight from a CH trip arrives back, the limousine company makes a mistake and won't be arriving until 4am, and the chief guest comes up and unleashes a stream of verbal abuse? Yes, you can answer back – but that will lose your company the contract for another CH day, so less work for you and your company. Or do you grit your teeth, think "I am going to make that person calm down" and charm him and his companions so they leave with smiles instead of moans?

Planning for the what if...

Eurostar is frequently used to transport Corporate clients on days out to France and Belgium. Before its first official journey, Eurostar had performed brilliantly. No hold-ups or breakdowns, so the (I am sorry to say!) all male Board decided they didn't need a back-up train for the glitzy inaugural trip. Of course, you have guessed it – as the train drew in to Waterloo to pick up the world's press, it ground to a halt, and a replacement had to be sent. Probably a woman might have insisted on back-up – who knows? But planning for the what if.... Factor is essential.

Working as a holiday rep is very useful on your CV, as handling clients at a resort is excellent training! Tourism Training Organisation has inexpensive distance learning courses giving basic principles and lists of employers, and they have a premium rate helpline with direct contact to a careers advisor who has worked in CH.

Cavendish is one well-known company that has won the Corporate Event Association Award eight times. They "recruit staff that have the right blend of interpersonal skills, attention to detail and commitment to making an event special for its guests. They enjoy making the day run like clockwork, anticipating and resolving problems before they happen and seeing guests enjoying themselves."

Women often run companies and work in top executive jobs in corporate hospitality. Men do well, but feminine

World Cup hero

Laurence Dallagio was a Rugby World Cup hero. With the 2006 Winter Olympics being held in Turin, someone from the Tourist Board was savvy enough to realise that Laurence's father came from the region, so signed the player up. CH companies can use the 'feel good' factor and introduce him to their groups visiting Turin before and during the Olympics. Dallagio is articulate and intelligent, which is essential for CH, and he showed this when the Turin Tourist Board asked him to talk to a group of press and travel writers, to promote the area. After an excellent talk he wheeled out his charming father – who had originally emigrated from Turin. Everyone liked meeting the Dallagios, enjoyed Turin hospitality and thought seriously about the possibilities for Hospitality.



logic and automatically planning for the "what if ..." factor suits women well; which may explain why so many reach the top of the industry.

And if you want a taster of this work, top freelance agencies such as Moore Plus and Shows UK often need well-presented temporary staff all over Britain, for indoor and outdoor events. Shows UK's Jo Thompson says "we need temporary staff (male and female) for events all over Britain."

Facts and contacts

Estimated spend £800 million a year.
Average company size 10 – 50 employees
www.cavendish-hospitality.co.uk 020 8567 3530
www.mooreplus.co.uk 020 8508 0555
www.omegaworld.co.uk
www.showsuk.ltd.uk 0121-704 2649
www.tourismtraining.biz 0906 553 2056 (£1 per minute)
www.turismotorino.org