

HOW TO HIRE ENTERTAINERS

**A guide to hiring entertainment for
company and private parties**

By Al Lampkin



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PREFACE

There may come a time when you are the entertainment chairperson for a company or private event. Probably the hardest thing to do is determine the budget. You can do that by using the worksheets in my e-book “How To Plan A Banquet” which can be downloaded free at <http://www.allampkinmagic.com> The next hardest thing, will probably be determining what kind of entertainment you want. You can find some help with that in my other e-book, too.

But the big problem is finding and hiring appropriate entertainment. That’s what this e-book addresses.

A WORD ABOUT AGENTS

In the e-book “How To Plan A Banquet,” we included a limited discussion about entertainment, and our basic advice was to hire a competent talent agent who specializes in “casuals,” which means one-day or one-night events, such as parties, weddings, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and other fun events.

Some agents represent actors and actresses, and unless they have a department that handles variety acts and bands, they would be of no help to you.

Some other agents handle only major attractions and celebrities, and unless you’re working with a serious budget, they won’t be able to help you get a band for Aunt Sarah’s 50th anniversary party.

A variety agent is able to help you get that close-up magician, band, and sometimes even name entertainers like Reba McEntire or The Temptations. Those that specialize in variety entertainment are sometimes called “full-service” agencies.

How do you tell who is a competent agent? That’s a good question, because if you asked an agent if he’s competent he’d be a fool to say anything but “Of course!” If he’s not smart enough to at least SAY he’s competent, he probably isn’t.

Having been in the entertainment business for over forty years, and having owned a full-service talent agency myself, I’ve seen a lot of people set up shop as agents. Some last, some don’t. Of course, the test of time is not the ONLY criterion, but it obviously is important. A huge percentage of my business came from people who either had used my services before or are referred to me by someone who had. I suspect that it’s difficult to stay in this business and do a lousy job. Like most businesses, we were dependent on repeat business and referrals; so longevity is a top criterion for deciding who is a competent agent.

Hopefully, you'll have a friend or business associate that uses an agent on a regular basis and can make a recommendation. If not, go to that old stand-by, the Yellow Pages or the internet, of course, you should remember that just having an ad or website doesn't mean that they are competent. I remember when I was a young boy studying magic, all of my magician friends, myself included, ordered business cards way before we were anywhere near ready to perform. Paperwork doesn't always equate with experience. I think now the first thing a fledgling performer does is build a website.

FINDING TALENT

Finding your own entertainment can be fun. I have spent years watching other acts, bands and attractions, and I never fail to enjoy it.

The internet or the Yellow Pages are a good starting place. Try using a search engine to find what you're looking for and again, having a website does not mean they're a quality entertainer.

You'll find listings in the Yellow Pages under ENTERTAINERS, PARTY PLANNERS, ENTERTAINMENT BUREAUS, and maybe some other categories.

Try a search on the internet for something like "bands in los angeles" or "juggler orange county" or whatever is appropriate and see what you come up with. I just want to warn you again. A beautiful website may not mean the best entertainer. Many websites are not built by the entertainer and even if they are, it doesn't translate to great entertainment. I'm just suggesting you proceed with caution.

Referrals from friends are all right, but always follow the reviewing procedures that we will outline for you a little later, just like you do with any other act or entertainer.

Watch your local newspaper for entertainers that are scheduled to appear for other groups in your area, and make it a point to catch their acts if possible. Of course, if you start going to other events, you'll see some poor entertainment, too. (I guess it holds true that you have to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince!) But even that can be helpful, if you are observant and make a note of what made the act good or bad.

REVIEWING AN ACT/BAND

If you're not working with an agent, you need to review the act somehow. There are three methods of reviewing an act: You can (1) go see the act perform live, (2) watch a video or DVD of the act, or (3) have the act come audition for you.

By far the BEST way is to see the act perform under roughly the same set of circumstances as your event. Seeing people perform in Las Vegas to a night-club crowd doesn't mean they'll be able to perform for little Gloria's 10th birthday party (and vice versa).

The problem with going to see live performances is that it is certainly VERY time consuming, and you will only be able to see a limited number of contenders before it's time to make a decision. But on the other hand, think of the fun you'll have!

Watching DVDs is an excellent method, as you can cover a lot of ground in an evening. Unfortunately, not all acts have DVDs or videos, and it would be a shame to eliminate a top-notch act just because they couldn't supply one.

Another BIG problem with video is that many acts supply a short, edited version of their act. This can be very deceptive. When reviewing an act by video, I always insisted (but didn't always get) an unedited version of the show. I never hired an act based on an edited video. I've heard of instances where an act was hired because they had a very powerful video, only to find that in their entire show, the only part that was any good was those few minutes on the video.

Don't be overly impressed by a DVD or video of a movie appearance, guest spot on a TV show, or commercial. That still doesn't mean they can do the job you want them for.

Unless you're an agent, you can just about forget about having the act audition for you. Maybe an act will drop off literature, and in the case of a magician, mime, or similar variety act, give a short demonstration, but again, a small segment along with a glib pitch can be very deceiving. Don't take chances; be sure of what you're buying!

When you talk to an entertainer on the phone, ask him to send his "press kit" or literature and a DVD or video tape. They may simply send you to their website. That's okay, too.

Many variety acts will have printed literature or a complete press kit (which includes a photo, biographical information, letters of recommendation and references or list of past performances). Again, please don't be taken in by good printed material. USUALLY, but not always, you can get a pretty good idea of their level of professionalism by the materials they send you. I do know some really great acts that work all the time and have virtually nothing in the way of printed materials, and of course I've seen some really outstanding materials but was disappointed when I saw the act.

Some performers no longer use paper press kits but instead prefer an electronic press kit either contained on a DVD they send you or simply up on their website. That's fine. It's certainly more contemporary method of promoting ones self.

Bands may or may not have professional-looking materials. I have a band that I send out to a lot of small weddings and installation banquets, and it took me almost a year to get a photo from them. (I'm still hoping to get a song list some day.) I've got another band that is absolutely tops in promotional material and their band is absolutely tops, too!

ARRANGEMENTS

It's important, once you've decided what entertainers or band you're going to hire, that arrangements be made clearly and in writing.

I've enclosed a sample of a letter you may wish to use. Some entertainers have their own contracts, but many do not, making it necessary for you to put everything down on paper and send it to the entertainer. I'm not a lawyer so I don't know how enforceable the letter is, but at least you have the information down on paper and you both understand and agree to the terms.

If I was serving as Agent, I had a contract that I would fill out based on our conversations, and forward to my client for a signature. I would try to collect as much information as I could about the event so that I could prevent any surprises. I would also write a binding contract with the entertainers.

By the way, this might be a good place to mention that talent agents are like travel agents in that they don't charge you for their services, but instead charge the entertainers. The agent is really looking out for your interests and can draw from countless entertainers and bands, being reasonably familiar with what each act does. There is an internet subscription service that lists thousands of entertainers, who their personal manager is (if any), and/or how to reach them. All entertainers are available to a full-service agent, rather than just a handful of acts that the agent has been able to put together.

When making your arrangements with entertainers make sure that you discuss everything:

1. Location. Best to send the act a map.
2. Date of performance.
3. Time and duration of performance. Bands usually work 4 hours, with a 10-15 minute break each hour. Talk to them about their breaks and how much over-time will cost. Some bands supply recorded music during their breaks.
4. Put the fee down in writing. I would hesitate to pay the act a deposit, although some entertainers and bands require it. I was a licensed agent, so an act knew that once I send the contract to them their pay was guaranteed. Both you and the entertainer are acting on a trust not yet demonstrated. The entertainer wonders if he'll get paid, and you wonder if he'll show up! It's the only system we have.
5. Method of payment. Acts always expect to be paid in full following the performance. If any other arrangements are to be made, please not only discuss it with them, but put it in your letter of agreement.
6. An act will want to know your time schedule...what time is the cocktail hour,

dinner, etc. and this brings up an interesting subject: feeding the act. Usually, if you have only one individual doing a show after dinner (e.g. a magician or a singer), you should invite him to join your group for dinner. However, it would not be expected of you to feed the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Even bands are seldom fed. If you use the band for the cocktail hour, during dinner, and then have them take a break while you give out awards or conduct other business, then it would be appropriate to feed them during that hour. It's not mandatory, however. (Keep in mind that a meal is a nice consolation for the act if they are giving you a special break on the fee.)

7. Who supplies the public address system? Bands usually have their own equipment, other acts may not. A guitar player who sings may require two microphones. Four singers might require microphones and expect you to supply them. If you're at a hotel or other banquet facility, you may be able to get everything you need from them. Extensive sound systems will have to come from a professional sound company. Make sure you discuss this with your performer and put it in writing.

8. Lighting. Again, your facility may have what you need. Spotlights with an operator can be rented for around \$350. Big concerts will require the services of a professional lighting company.

9. Stage? A banquet of fewer than 50-75 people may not even need risers, but when you start getting up in the numbers, you'll need to get your entertainers up to where the audience can see them. A catering facility or hotel will usually have 4' x 8' risers at various heights so that you can build a platform or stage for your entertainment.

10. Is it outdoors? What if it rains? You should really specify what you will do. Will you then hold it indoors? The act or entertainer has blocked out that day for you and perhaps turned down other work. They are really entitled to their fee even if the program is rained out, unless you've made other arrangements.

11. Seating. It's very difficult for an entertainer to have a dance floor between himself and the audience. If you're having a dance after a comedian or other entertainer, talk with the act about how close the seats or tables need to be. Maybe he can work on the dance floor.

12. Does the act need a place to change clothes or set up equipment?

13. Does the act sell albums or other merchandise at the performance? Some musical acts offer albums after the show. Is this all right with you?

14. Parking and unloading. How nice it is for an entertainer to pull up in front of the YMCA and find a sign "Reserved for Entertainer." You can't always do that, but remember that some acts have a lot to carry in. If the only parking available costs money, you should reimburse the entertainers. Talk about it and include your decision in your letter of agreement.

There are plenty of things to inquire about. Take time to picture in your mind exactly how things will be. If there is a question in your mind about anything, ask. Ask the hotel, the band, the act, the agent.

CONCLUSION

Well, really, that was easy. Just spend months looking at acts and days negotiating and a few weeks wondering if you blew it. (Or give a call to a competent talent agent and let him worry about the hard stuff!)

Perhaps a good rule to remember is "You get what you pay for." A friend called me and wanted Mariachis for a Church Mexican Fiesta. I quoted him a price for five Mariachis for two hours, but he went out and hired his own for less. He called me up later just sick about it. He had called a group advertised somewhere and got a low price...and low quality. It's not a new story. Don't look for the lowest price; look for quality. If you can't afford top quality, it's probably better not to have entertainment at all rather than to hire an act that makes you and everyone else squirm in their seats.

Please feel free e-mail me about anything related to entertainment, whether you're hiring the entertainment direct or if I can be of assistance in the selection. My experience is at your disposal.

And whatever you do, ENJOY!

Al Lampkin is a comedy magician,
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PRINCESS WANTA COMPANY
Makers Of The Unbreakable Widget

1842 Los Albany Street, Los Angeles, CA 90023
312/555-2345

February 31

Freddy the Magic Man
1234 Count Me Out Street
Pasadena, California 93345

Dear Mr. Magic Man:

This is to confirm our arrangements for you to entertain at our annual installation banquet to be held October 32 at the Rancho Cucamonga Holiday Hotel, 2345 Hotel Ave., Cucamonga, California.

The banquet will begin with the cocktail hour from 6:00pm to 7:00pm at which time we will sit down for dinner. We would be delighted if you would join us. Please let us know if you would prefer the fish or the steak.

We have a deejay who will provide you with a microphone on a microphone stand and the hotel has arranged to put up a 8' wide by 6' deep by 2' high platform, with stairs at one end, for you to perform on. Your 30 minute performance of comedy and magic should begin after dinner, approximately 8:15pm. I will have a \$750 check ready for you at the conclusion of your performance. Please also bring me your parking ticket for full validation.

Please sign a copy of this letter and return to me to solidify our arrangements.

Most sincerely,

Marta Stuart

From: Freddy The Magic Man
To: Marta Stuart

Everything looks great! I'll be there. I'd prefer: Steak _____ Fish _____

X_____

LIBERTY AWARDS FUNDING

Helping to improve life through investing
2356 Nobody Street
Lancing, Ohio 98823
912/555-3456

Leon Huge
Big Band From Cleveland
1902 Go Jump Street
Pine Grove, Pa 69903

February 31

Dear Mr Huge:

Thank you for agreeing to have your 8-piece band play for my daughter's wedding on July 14 at the Forrest Glen Country Club, 2323 Country Club Drive, Lancing, Ohio from 8:00pm to midnight. As we discussed, the band is to complete their set-up by 6:00pm and you will play recorded music through your sound system from 6:00pm to 8:00pm for the cocktail hour and dinner.

You also agreed to act as the emcee introducing the bride and groom and the entire wedding party as they enter the room at approximately 6:30pm. I will e-mail you the line-up at least a week before the event. Please kick off the dance set at 8:00pm with the Father /Daughter dance "Isn't She Lovely" and then invite the entire wedding party to join them on the dance floor at the end of that song and play "Celebration."

I understand that the band will play four 45-minute sets each hour and you will provide recorded music during your breaks. I will have a check for \$2,450 ready for you when you arrive. I will also obtain full validation for all of your musicians if you will collect their parking slips. I will have sandwiches, sodas, coffee, iced tea and fruit juice in the break room at 7:00pm for you and the band. Please check in with Diane at the Country Club and she will show you the break room.

Please sign below and return a copy of this letter to make sure we're on the same page.

Thanks.

Sammy Claws

Sammy:
Everything is as agreed. We will be there.

X_____