



Alpha Rho Chi

National Professional Fraternity
Architecture and the Allied Arts



HOW TO

Host a Professional Networking Event

by Aaron Feldman, Vitruvius Alumnus

How To – Organize a Professional Networking Event (Happy Hour)

By Aaron Feldman, Vitruvius Alumni Association

Organizing a happy hour is a fairly easy thing to do. Getting people to come to a happy hour is an entirely different story, especially when you are marketing to a group of strangers. With enough advanced planning, research and marketing, however, you can organize a professional networking event that brings together a large group of people with similar interests and increases the visibility and credibility of Alpha Rho Chi at the same time.

1. Choose Your Audience. The most difficult part of planning your event is choosing your audience. What demographic do you want to target, and what do they have to gain by attending your event? Choose a specific theme or topic that ties the entire event together. This way, you can focus your marketing efforts on an audience interested in that subject, and your guests know that they will have at least one interest in common with one another. If you plan your event in conjunction with a larger event (a conference, ground breaking ceremony or awards presentation, for example), then your theme is easily taken care of. Additionally, a happy hour planned in conjunction with a larger event means that there is already a group of people with similar interests gathered for another reason; your event can just be viewed as a continuation of that larger event. Also, if you market your event as an extension of that larger event, you gain credibility, as it shows you have done your homework. Be careful, though, not to make it appear as though your event is an official function of the larger event (unless you have permission from the larger event organizers to do so).

2. Choose Your Date. If you are planning your event in conjunction with a larger event, make sure your event occurs during a break in the larger event's schedule. Otherwise, make sure your event is competing with as few other events as possible. Although it is nearly impossible to choose a date that is ideal for your entire target audience, the last thing you want is to make everyone choose.

- Check the calendars of nearby Alpha Rho Chi chapters and alumni associations. Will everyone be busy at a recruitment event or an alumni gathering?
- Check with other professional associations and societies? Will a large group of your audience be out of town at another conference?
- Check your own calendar. Are there any holidays in the way? Weddings? Birthday parties?
- Lastly, look out for other major events in the area. Make sure that parking, access, security, or excessive crowds will not dissuade people from attending your event.

3. Choose Your Location. Make sure it is easy to find and to get to. If you are planning an event in a city, choose a site near public transit. If you are planning your event in conjunction with a larger event, choose a location that is walkable.

Start by choosing a neighborhood. Research all of the possible locations within that neighborhood (restaurants, bars, bowling allies, stadiums, parks, and so on) and narrow that list down to the five or six locations that will best suit the event's needs. If the potential sites have webpages with calendars, make sure the site isn't already booked on the day of your event.

At least six weeks prior to your event (depending on how many potential sites you have and how far they are from one another), visit the sites on your list. Go during happy hour or a weekend afternoon; any time when the place is not too crowded and when a manager is likely to

be on duty (managers tend not to be at bars or restaurants on Mondays). Walk around the place. Hang out for a while to make sure it is the type of ambiance that reflects the tone of your event. If you still think the place is a good candidate, ask to speak to a manager (make sure to let the person you're asking know you want to plan an event there, otherwise he or she will think you are looking for the manager to lodge a complaint). Introduce yourself and explain your event. *Honestly* estimate the number of people you expect to attend (if anything, guess on the low side, so the manager is pleasantly surprised with more business than expected). Find out how the manager can accommodate you.

To make sure you've got all of your bases covered, prepare a list of questions to research or ask before making your final decision. Some of these questions can be answered just by walking through the front door of a site. For others, you may want to follow up with the manager via e-mail, just to make sure you have a written record (more on that later). This list is by no means comprehensive, but it should be enough to set you on the right track. Edit or add to it to suit your event's needs.

- Is the site adequately sized for the number of people you expect? You don't want your event to be so crowded and loud that no one can move, but you also don't want a room so big that it still looks empty when all of your guests have arrived.
- Is the site laid out for people to move around freely and comfortably? An open floor plan with standing-height tables is ideal for mingling, whereas very few people will feel comfortable moving from chair to chair in a typical restaurant layout.
- Are there other means of distraction? Televisions playing college football, pool tables and dartboards are all great social equalizers. Instead of awkward silences, people can turn their attention to these diversions in order to keep the discussion lively.
- Can the manager guarantee that a certain area will be dedicated to your group? Make sure you can carve out a base of operations: somewhere that guests can easily see and quickly confirm that they are indeed in the right place, even if they don't see a familiar face.
- Will the site allow you to put up signage advertising your event? Again, you want to make sure people know they are in the right place.
- Is there a cost associated with reserving a space? Obviously, free is best. If you choose a site that is not normally busy at the time you are planning your event (a Saturday evening in a bar next to an office park, for example) the manager will be more than happy to give you a space for free in exchange for the prospect of increased business.
- Can the manager offer food, drink or entertainment discounts for your guests? If you can advertise special prices as part of your marketing strategy, you will get a better-attended event, which means the manager makes more money and everyone ends up happy.

Once you settle on a place that meets all your needs, make the reservation. Most bars and restaurants have a central calendar where they keep all of their events; make sure your event makes it into that calendar. Get the manager's business card or contact information and send him or her a follow-up e-mail a day or two after you've booked the event to clarify all of the terms you discussed when you spoke in person. This way you both have a written record of the conditions you were promised. If the manager will not return your e-mails or phone calls, you may want to consider booking a different site, just to be sure your event does not get double-booked (especially if you are getting the space for free). Maintain occasional contact with the site's manager just to make sure your event is still on his or her radar. Simply adding the manager's address to your marketing campaign should be enough of a reminder.

4. Advertise Your Event. Start by compiling a list of people you want to reach out to. Use the Alpha Rho Chi database to search for all of the brothers within driving distance of your event. Add to that list any brother who may be in town when you are hosting your event (for example: for an event held in conjunction with the American Society of Landscape Architects' national conference, add every landscape architect in Alpha Rho Chi to your list). Include all of the names on the Alpha Rho Chi Master Directory. Even if these brothers cannot make it to the event, they will know whom else to forward the invitation to. Assuming you are reaching out to professionals outside of Alpha Rho Chi, develop that list, too. Go through your personal contact list for anyone you know who may be interested. Reach out to well-connected brothers for names and address of their associates. Don't be afraid of your list being too big, as long as everyone on your list has a connection with the event or its theme. The worst thing that can happen is that someone throws your invitation away.

Develop a marketing strategy. Ideally, your advertising should be consistent in tone, voice and aesthetic, regardless of whether it is in print, digital, or verbal. Once you have your message, apply it to as many media as possible. Make sure to include the theme of the event, date, time, location, and links to additional information (the website of the event location, and the organizer's contact information).

- Design and print postcards to mail to the group of people most likely to attend. If you print extra postcards, you can also hand them out at other professional events and social gatherings. Several websites such as www.clubflyers.com, www.vistaprint.com or www.printrunner.com will print several hundred postcards at a surprisingly low rate, provided you give them enough lead-time. Mail your postcards a month before the event.
- Set up an e-mail campaign. Use a website like www.mailchimp.com, www.constantcontact.com or www.icontact.com to design attractive e-mails, manage your contact list and ensure your e-mails don't get lost in spam filters. You can also use these services to see how many people opened your e-mail, how many times it was forwarded and whose e-mail address did not work. Send an e-mail a month before the event, and a reminder a week before the event.
- Ask the Worthy Grand Scribe to post an advertisement on the APX News section of www.alpharhochi.org, along with a page containing all of the event's information.
- Add an invitation to the Alpha Rho Chi Facebook and LinkedIn pages.
- Reach out to as many people as you can to personally invite them to the event. A huge element in people's decision to attend events like this is the "I'll go if you go" factor. If you can convince enough of your primary contacts to attend, then they will spread the word to their friends and so on.

5. Attend Your Event! Try to arrive 30 minutes to an hour early just to make sure everything is in order. Recruit other brothers to arrive early so the guests who arrive on time aren't embarrassed by being the first ones there. Seek out the manager to make sure he or she knows you are there and ready to go. Introduce yourself to the wait staff or bartenders to make sure they are aware of the event and take good care of the group. Set up your signs, banners, or other decorations to identify who you are.

Nametags are a personal decision; you can choose whether or not to put them out for your guests to wear. On one hand, they allow strangers to remember one another's names. On the other hand, they make an event more formal than it may need to be. Think about the tone you are trying to set before deciding whether to use them or not.

Finally, enjoy yourself! Make an effort to greet all of your guests. Try not to let anyone stand alone in a corner. Your guests will only be as social and outgoing as their host is. If you are having a good time, then there is a good chance that everyone else is, too.

If you have any additional questions or are interested in planning a happy hour in conjunction with a larger professional event, contact Aaron Feldman at alumnierevents@alpharhochi.org.