

Planning Your After-Hours Event



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Planning a special event?

Are you planning a grand opening, open house or ribbon cutting for your business? This guidebook, available only to members of the Lombard Chamber of Commerce lists six steps that we have put together. These steps can be an invaluable tool in helping you plan your special event. They range from selecting the date to getting media coverage. Don't worry, we can help make your event truly special. Staging a special event can be easier than you think!

Step One: Date Selection

Selecting a date is one important decision to make as you begin planning a successful event. Remember, it can affect all subsequent steps. Before you make your decision consider the following:

- Allow plenty of preparation time. If possible, give yourself at least three to four weeks to make arrangements.
- Avoid holding your event on or too near a major holiday. If you are trying to attract a specific crowd, take note of their holiday work hours.
- Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays are the best attendance days for community leaders and business people. Mondays are usually too busy to leave work and on Fridays, many people leave town early to begin the weekend, particularly in the summer.
- Remember to notify the Chamber at least 10 business days in advance of a ribbon cutting so that we can have time to notify the Ambassadors and the local newspaper.

Step Two: Choosing a Time

The time you choose to hold your event is crucial to its success. An important step in the planning process is to determine the type of special event you will conduct.

- Few successful special events are early in the morning (7-7:30 a.m.) As a rule, morning events should begin no earlier than 9:00 a.m.
- Mid-morning to late afternoon events usually get the best turnout. However, try to avoid scheduling over the lunch hour unless you plan to offer lunch. Business After Hours events do well in the 4:00 to 6:00 range.
- Early notice will get your event on guests' calendars. A reminder via email or flier closer to the date of the event will help if invitations are sent early. The Chamber can help you in this regard by sending out a reminder Eblast.
- For media coverage, consider their deadlines before selecting a time. Media outlets will inform you of their deadlines over the phone.

Step Three: Invitation List

Depending on the type of event and the type of business you run, there are several different people you may want to invite or notify. These are suggestions of people you should consider inviting to your special event:

- Current and potential customers
- Family and friends
- Suppliers
- Your employees and their spouses
- Media
- Those who helped you get started
 - Banker
 - Accountant
 - Attorney
 - Architects/engineers
 - Other advisors
- Neighboring business people in your area
- Representatives of the Chamber (once you have contacted the Chamber, we will take care of notifying the Ambassadors Committee.)

Prepare a nicely-written letter or a very basic invitation. Keeping it simple is most important. Check that all basic information is included; who, what, where, when and why. Be sure to include an RSVP if needed. It can be either a return reservation card or request to confirm their attendance by phone. A phone number is usually easiest. The Chamber will post your event on their website and have online RSVP available as well. In most cases an RSVP is not necessary unless you need a head count to order food.

Allow plenty of notice. Two weeks is preferable, but 10 days to a week is ample for most events. If you are mailing invitations, send them via first-class mail if possible. Bulk mail can take a week or longer to arrive and attendance may lessen because of such delays.

It may be necessary to include a map or clear directions to your event. A street address alone is not always sufficient. Always provide easy-to-find and accessible parking for your guests. If your parking lot is difficult to locate, make note of it in your invitations and/or directions so that people know where to go.

Predicting how many people will attend is tricky. You can estimate between 10 and 30 of those that are invited through a Chamber Eblast to attend. The percentage of friends and personal associates will be much higher than those who receive courtesy invitations.

Step Four: Food and Beverage

Although it is an added expense that you may prefer to avoid, serving food and beverage is a necessity for a successful event. It is also a nice gesture that shows your guests that you appreciate them taking time out of their busy schedules to support your endeavor. Because it has become a tradition, your event will be remembered as the exception to the rule if you choose not to offer refreshments. Here are some helpful food hints:

Morning events:

- coffee juice fruit muffins pastries

A full breakfast is not necessary unless you are in the restaurant business and want to go overboard and impress your guests.

Luncheon events:

- sandwich other lunch-appropriate meal water or soda

This is the mid-day meal for most of your guests, so don't hold an event from noon to 1:00 p.m. and expect your guests to go elsewhere for lunch unless it is clearly specified in your invitations.

Afternoon events:

- Light hors d'oeuvres Finger foods Fruit and Vegetable platters
Cookies Soda or punch Coffee Tea

NOTE: IL State Law prohibits businesses from offering complimentary alcoholic drinks

Water is always appropriate as an additional beverage, because some guests may prefer it to the other beverage selections you provide.

Catering:

If your event is a large undertaking or you do not have enough preparation time, you may want to enlist the help of a caterer. Caterers can also give you good advice on your event. Check with the Chamber for recommendations of area restaurant members that also do catering.

If you decide to provide your own refreshments, be sure to have ample food and beverage supply for your guests. Also, remember to provide sufficient plates, cups, napkins, trash cans and other supply items. Running out of food and beverage is a bad way to end an event.

Step Five: Program Planning

In all Ribbon Cutting ceremonies, a picture will be taken for the local newspaper, whether by a Chamber member or the newspaper photographer. These events are usually more laid back and won't require any of the following planning tips.

Whether you are staging a groundbreaking, grand opening or Business After-Hours for your business, you may want to consider these points to help the event run more smoothly:

Speaker(s)

Limit the number of speakers to one or two at the most. It is tempting to let several people speak on behalf of your business, but in most cases, one speaker can represent the business well. Feel free to have several employees, owners, business representatives, etc. present for the event, but decide ahead of time which person will do the majority of the talking. This will prevent lengthy, rambling remarks and redundant responses.

Tour

Many ribbon cutting ceremonies include a group tour of the business. If you choose to give a tour, be sure to have a knowledgeable employee conduct the tour.

Program Conclusion

You may choose to conclude your special event with a ribbon cutting, a tour, or another appropriate or symbolic activity to commemorate the event. These are nice ways to let guests know that the formal program is over and they also create good photo opportunities. The Chamber will generally have a camera on hand to take advantage of these photo opportunities. The Chamber will also take care of getting pictures of the ceremony into the next newsletter.

Back-up Plan

If you are holding an outdoor event, be sure to have a back-up plan for inclement weather.

Camera

You may wish to have your own camera on hand to capture the events, as well.

Door Prizes

Consider having a door prize or drawing as part of your program. Winning a sample of your product or a dinner at a nice restaurant can add to your guests' enjoyment and perhaps even boost attendance.

Thank You Notes

Be sure to send thank you letters the day after your event to anyone who played a key role in staging it; particularly those who took part in the program or ceremonies.

Intimate Gathering: Here are some hints for smaller ceremonies.

30 Second Speech

Be sure to have a brief (30 second) “commercial” about your business prepared. This is an opportunity to give everyone information about your company. During a typical ribbon cutting, you will be given a chance to introduce yourself and tell everyone a bit about your business, so be sure to plan what you want to say ahead of time.

Keep It Short

For smaller events, it is especially important to keep things short and to the point. Most guests will not plan to stay long, so your best bet is to have a simple program with introductions, your 30 second “commercial”, the ribbon cutting and pictures, and an optional tour and social time afterwards.

Large Celebration: Here are some hints for larger events

Seating

If you are hosting a longer formal program, be sure to have proper seating accommodations for your guests.

Sound

Depending upon the size of the group, you may need to set up a sound system so that everyone can hear the speakers. The Chamber has a portable microphone and speakers that can be borrowed for these occasions, depending upon the size of the room.

Step Six: Media Coverage – Large Events

Realistically, you should not expect to have extensive media coverage, but inviting the media to your special event is definitely worthwhile. Be aware that there is a lack of people to cover every event as well as a lack of sufficient airtime/print space to carry every story. The media are overwhelmed by business community news of grand openings and groundbreakings and they are not often able to provide extensive coverage to all. Here are some suggestions of things you can do to enhance the chances that your event will be publicized.

Invitations:

Send your invitation to the news directors or city editors at least a week prior to your event. Include a brief personal letter explaining some details about your firm and why your event is different or has some significance to the community.

News Release:

Include a brief news release that contains the Journalistic basics of who, what, where, when and why. The release does not need to be fancy, just factual (See "Sample Press Release" page).

Follow-up:

A follow-up reminder call the day before the event is a good idea.

Photographers:

You may want a friend or photographer to take a black and white photo of the key people or activities at your event. This will make it easy for you to mail or email it to all daily, weekly and bi-weekly newspapers with a brief, clear caption.

Lombard Chamber Services:

By reading this booklet, you have already taken advantage of some help available to the members of the Lombard Chamber. Here are some additional ways the Chamber can be useful to you:

- Providing a mail merge list of Lombard Chamber members for you to use to create mailing labels (sorry, we do not share email addresses).
- Send out an Eblast to our contact list to have members attend your event and represent businesses of Lombard.
- Post your event on our website Coming Events as well as an invitation with online RSVP capabilities.
- Supply a list of restaurants that can cater your event.
- Supply traditional items, such as ribbon and ceremonial scissors.

What to include in a press release:

The press release should be printed on your organization's letterhead if possible. Include the current date, desired release date and an eye-catching title at the top of the page.

The body of the press release should contain pertinent information, including your **business name**, **phone** and **address**; **type of event**; **who** is invited to attend the event; **when**, **where** and **why** the event will be held; helpful **directions** to the event; **what** will take place at the event; type of **dress** (formal, business casual, casual, etc.); any **prize** give-aways or other gestures that will attract people; a **contact person's** name, number and e-mail where questions can be directed (if different from business phone and e-mail); and any other information that is important for your event. This information should be segmented into two paragraphs:

Paragraph 1: who, what, when and where

Paragraph 2: how, why and any other details

A brief **quote** and/or **description** of your business can be included in the release as well. Other details, such as **business hours** or an **opening date** (if different from the date of your event) can be helpful also.