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Ready, Set, Summer: The Event Catering Guide

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With the summer events season starting earlier every year now, there is less time between the end of the last and the beginning of the next for taking that well-deserved break and planning ahead as well as continuing trading in between, which means that you may well be spinning more plates than usual at the moment.

We know how important the season is for you and that there is a lot to navigate. From pitching for work to negotiating fees, checking and testing equipment, finding staff and getting compliance ready... The list gets longer and sometimes more complicated every year so whether you're a seasoned pro or just starting out in the world of events, we're here to make things simpler when it comes to compliance and to be that ear whenever you need us.

We work with many organisations in the events industry to champion our members, educate on the best ways of working and to be that bridge that's so often needed. We recently spoke at the Association of Independent Festivals (AIF) Congress and The Event Production Show (EPS), we work with National Outdoor Events Association (NOEA) and Association of Festival Organisers (AFO). As well as this, we contribute to The Purple Guide and are part of steering groups that focus on sustainability, safety and creating opportunities for the sector.

Within all of this work, what is most important to us is to be able to champion NCASS members and work together to support the success of the industry for everyone involved. It may not always be obvious when you're drowning in paperwork but fundamentally, the aims for event organisers and caterers who work in events are the same; a profitable event, seamless delivery, happy customers, transparency when it comes to money and operating safely! It's important to remember that there is risk for everyone involved, everyone is part of the audience experience and that experience is...everything.

You are critical to an event or festival experience. Food and drink is one of the biggest spend points at shows and you

are customer facing. Hospitality is fundamental to customer experience and you are at the helm of this so the value you bring to a live show is more significant than you might think. You're not just providing food and drink, you are providing an experience that is individual to your business, that enhances an attendee's experience and you are providing the best version of hospitality that you can.

However, doing your thing at a live event doesn't just happen – making it work takes a lot of preparation which also contributes to your value wherever you are working.

Safety first

Are you using the NCASS Safety Management System and are all of your documents including risk assessments, certification, allergen management processes and training up to date and uploaded to your member dashboard? All of this groundwork is key to your business all year round and event organisers shouldn't have to chase you for an insurance certificate or RA. Safety and the law are non-negotiable and if you haven't got the right systems, processes and documentation in place, you'll find applying for events pretty tough going.

Researching and applying

We would always advise that you research the events you're pitching to as much as possible. Go to events and festivals, look at their social channels, their websites and have a chat with people who have worked on the shows you're interested in.

Look for photos of previous years, does the event look busy? How long has the event been running? What is the attendance?

Does it usually sell out? How many traders will there be? Are other traders returning each year?

If an event is in its first year, you must approach it with more caution. With no previous track record of tickets sales or general success, it goes without saying that it's a bigger risk for you as a caterer.



That's not to say it won't be successful for you but ongoing communication with organisers is key.

Festivals and events open their applications as early as November for the coming year. Researching and getting in touch with them is your chance to start to build a relationship. Ask questions about the type of show it is and think about whether your food / drink offering suits. Ask what type of site it is, how many people they are expecting, how many other caterers there will be and what the range of food is. If you don't know the answers to these questions then you can't really make an informed decision about whether it's for you or not.

Location matters

Always ask to see a site map with the pitch you are applying for clearly marked out. Is it right at the heart of the event or hidden round the corner by the toilets? Are you in the arena or the campsite? Does your food match your pitch location? For example, breakfast traders would be better suited to campsites rather than late night areas. If you are in the wrong location, you might spend the whole event watching people walk past with food instead of selling yours to them.

Do the sums

There is no point in working at an event or festival if you're not going to make any money. For all of that hard work, planning, stocking, staffing, driving, setting up and the physical work it requires, you need to make some money. It is therefore essential that you work out whether the event is for you before you apply.

Having said this, every event is a risk and there are no guarantees so we always recommend that if a pitch fee (in addition to your estimated costs) is too much for you to lose, i.e. losing that money would put your business in jeopardy, then that pitch fee is too high for you and a risk you probably cannot afford to take.

Be realistic

Is the food / drink you want to sell of the right quality and quick to turn around? It is imperative to know how many portions you can do per hour and how much of a queue you can handle. It's also important to think about quality and whether you're catering a festival or wedding, do you need to adapt your menu? Have you worked out the most efficient systems and logistics? How many well-trained members of staff will you need to keep the momentum up when you're serving and what's the quickest way of serving?

It's much better to figure out how doable a job is and go in with your eyes open rather than just seeing how it turns out.

What events want

This varies depending on the event but a great response to a call for traders, tenders or applications is key and will cover parts of your business such as menus, safety management system, your hygiene rating, insurance, documentation, a chance to talk about what makes you stand out, your training, and your policies such as your sustainability policy. Negotiating and contracting

Don't be afraid to try to negotiate, at least to get a fee based on a percentage rather than a flat rate basis. We always advise a percentage rather than a set fee because it shares the risk between you and the organiser and, when arranged fairly, this approach can lead to higher revenues for both parties.

If after negotiating, you still feel a pitch fee is too high, we advise you walk away and find an alternative event as you are better off making a £500 profit on a small local event over a day or two than working your butt off for five days at a big show to break even because the fee was too high.

We'll say it again and again - always get a contract. If you don't have a contract, you have very limited comeback if something goes wrong or if things weren't how they were stipulated they would be. So the possibility of getting your money back will be slim to none.



Communicate

Make sure you're straight-forward to work with, that you can be contacted easily and work with the person chasing you for documentation.

Building relationships and having good communication is key to repeat work. Be courteous and professional and always look to give a good impression of your business. Remain respectful, polite and try to be transparent and treat people how you wish to be treated. Make things easy for them and fingers crossed they'll do the same for you in return.

Get the fundamentals right

If you're not sure about something, ask the question. Ask for a template if you're being asked for a specific type of method statement. Ask what the site rules are for build and break and stick to them, make sure you're up to date with your paperwork including all of your risk assessments and method statements along with your insurance certification.

You also need to make sure your systems, including allergen management, are all water tight and don't forget that we're here to help so get in touch with our team if you need support.

Play to your strengths

You are an independent business just like a lot of the shows and organisers you work with which means that you've also had to build your brand, tell your story, create a customer base both online and in real life and be ahead of the curve in order to stand out. And that's all before you pick up a chopping board! Use this to your advantage, get involved with the

marketing of the shows you're working at, shout about what you do, tell your story! Just like in the kitchen, prep is everything and anything you can do to enhance a show in the run up benefits everyone when you open.

Know when to walk away

Sometimes you've just got to do it.

You've researched the event, ticked all the boxes and been offered a pitch right next to the main bar but the organiser won't offer you a contract confirming what you have agreed verbally. It takes real courage to say, "thanks but no thanks," but sometimes you've just got to do it. Don't take risks you can't afford, and don't make decisions based on only having half of the information you need. Sometimes you've got to walk away when it's too much of a risk. Not doing a show is far less a risk than taking on a bad one!

If you're thinking of getting into events or you're an events and festival specialist and would like to share your experience, get in touch with our team by emailing:

creative@ncass.org.uk



We've been with NCASS for five years and I cannot recommend them highly enough. Our cashback settlement with Booker means we actually earn money from being members and the NCASS service is always flawless and speedy.

Sam Dabb

We've found NCASS a very useful organisation as we started a new business in the mobile food industry. All of the staff we've spoken to have been approachable, friendly and helpful. The support packages and programmes that NCASS have put in place - and are developing all of the time - are good quality. It's great to see some forward thinking and involvement on behalf of their many clients from seminars, advice and publishing to lobbying government.

JasonM

NCASS Team is very hands on all of our requirements. They are very efficient with communication and would see to it that all our concerns and queries are solved and given attention to. Special mention to Valerie who would always see to it that our team is okay!

Agatha Flores



Get in touch with our team and we'd love to have a chat.

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