

Security Concerns

How to keep important guests feeling safe and protected, and how to deal with the personal security V.I.P.s bring with them.

PROMINENT GUESTS TEND TO BRING EXTRA ATTENTION to the events they attend—some of it good (publicity, excitement among other guests), some of it not so good (crashers, stalkers, and worse). So dealing with V.I.P.s also often means dealing with security.

WHAT DO YOU NEED? Different types of V.I.P.s require—and prefer—different kinds of protection. “Minor celebrities think they need more security than they really do,” warns **Micro Target Media** vice president **Danielle Jennings**. “It gives them a sense of power.”

On the other hand, C.E.O.s often like to be very discreet. **Bary Meyerson**, the owner and founder of New York-based personal and event security firm **Meyerson Associates**, which has handled events like **Ralph Lauren** fashion shows and **Chelsea Clinton**'s birthday party, says that top executives often prefer personal security to blend into the crowd. “They want [security professionals] to appear like a business colleague who can speak with people,” he says. “Not only will they offer an element of surprise against threats, but they are not perceived as a road block for them to meet other guests.”

Note that an event with lots of high-level guests does not necessarily need more security. “If you have the proper security in place, then it doesn't matter if 18 V.I.P.s are coming with their own security or not, or if it's **Bill Clinton** or **Bruce Willis**,” says **Mike Zimet**, owner of **Mike Zimet Enterprises**, a New York-based personal protection and event security firm that handles movie premieres and corporate and diplomatic events. And you don't want your event to look like an armed camp. “Event security has already created a secure perimeter, so personal security can just be on the edge of the event where they can see the person but won't upset the look and balance of an event,” Zimet adds.

WHERE DO YOU START? Provide your event security team with a complete guest list in advance. “We can then contact the V.I.P.s' staff directly to find out who has their own security or will require additional security because they have received a lot of publicity lately or a specific threat,” says **Chuck Garelick**, managing director of **GSS Security Services Inc.**, a New York-based security firm that handles events from **Pediatric AIDS Foundation** fund-raisers to the **Times Square** ball drop on New Year's Eve. “Security for basic movement in a crowd-control situation is different from a threat through fan mail or an identified individual like a stalker.”

If the celebrity is bringing his own security guards, your security staff will check their backgrounds, qualifications, licensing, and insurance, as well as discuss your site's gun regulations. “We will also work out some kind of ID process so they will be identifiable to us,” Garelick says. If personal security shows up without prior warning, it can create major problems. “They could create a liability because we don't know anything about them,” Garelick says.

“Sometimes a celebrity may want to bring three, four, five security people,” Zimet says. “They don't need them all. The place is already secure through us and there is no need to crowd the event with all this security.”

HOW DO YOU PLAN AHEAD? All security issues and plans for arrival and departure times should be decided prior to an event. “We have a walk-through in advance, show them the private limo drop off, the staging area for their driver where their car can be kept separate from the other guests, and where they can have a separate entrance and walkway,” says **Christina Sion**, vice president of food and event services at Los Angeles' **California Science Center**. “They want everything away from public access, where they can control it.” Sion also advocates not being the only contact person. “Pros are better served talking to each other, so have your security people talk to their security people and then follow up with them,” she says.

Making an important guest's personal security aware of your needs is a must, as celebrities only do what their protection tells them. Sion recalls how a walk-through with then-Vice President **Al Gore**'s advance team prior to the opening of the science center in 1998 led to him performing a high-wire bike stunt the night of the event. “It never would have happened on the fly if his security hadn't tested it by throwing themselves into the net 50 feet below again and again,” Sion says.

In addition to securing your event space and vetting staff, remember that event security staff also interacts with guests—sometimes very closely—so prepare them to meet any requests. “Inevitably my client will ask his security where the bathroom is,” Meyerson says. “You have to know in advance because you don't want to zigzag them around the entire event, and preferably you can get them a private bathroom.”

HOW DOES EVERYONE WORK TOGETHER? Not all security is created equal. “Law enforcement, like the state police, U.S. state department, and Secret Service, always takes the lead,” Garelick says.

Meryl Hillsberg, senior event planner, conference and banquet services at **UJA-Federation of New York**, where she works on fund-raisers and events—often with top political figures or C.E.O.s of major corporations—once had the then-president of Ireland as the keynote speaker at a UJA event. His advance team told her to move the podium three feet to the left so there was no direct line through windows to the president. “You just have to say, ‘No problem,’” Hillsberg says, and make the event as safe as possible.

And working well with security pros—especially a V.I.P.'s own protection—has its rewards. “I've found you have to treat security people as if they are your own V.I.P.s,” Hillsberg says. “Go out of your way to be accommodating and friendly, make sure to fill whatever their need is. They are the only ones who can get you the access you need to the V.I.P.”



IT HAPPENED TO ME

V.I.P.s Behaving Badly

AN EXPENSIVE NO-SHOW At the opening of Los Angeles' California Science Center in 1998, a board member arranged for a high-profile, Grammy award-winning singer to perform for free. The singer's face went out on every invitation, and the event drew 1,200 guests, many of them V.I.P.s in their own right. Christina Sion, vice president of food and event services at the California Science Center, and her staff filled the singer's requests for a V.I.P. trailer and other amenities, which totaled \$40,000. But on the night of the event, Sion was outside on her cell phone for an hour with the singer's staff, who told her he was 10 minutes away—repeatedly, every 10 minutes. “We were trying to gauge the night's program as to when he was performing, and finally I just made the decision that he was not coming and we should move on,” Sion says. They were never reimbursed for the cost of the amenity-filled trailer.

A DIVA ON A ROLL In the end, planners do whatever it takes to make important guests happy. Danielle

Jennings, former global head of event marketing at Merrill Lynch and now a vice president at Micro Target Media, remembers one V.I.P. who got very upset when the hotel didn't put the toilet paper roll on the “right” way. “She would freak out and call us, and we would have to call housekeeping to go to her room and make it right,” Jennings says. “Once you live in that world, you don't think requests are crazy anymore. You just shrug your shoulders and say, ‘That's my job.’”

SOMETHING IN THE WATER For one planner, the V.I.P.'s wife was the biggest troublemaker. Before a dinner, the wife said she had water allergies, and had to have special water flown in from a particular place, not only for her to drink but to be used to cook her food. “The day of the dinner, the water didn't arrive in time, so I had to send someone out to get all the purified water they could find. We got a recommendation from the chef as to which water would be best,” the planner says. “Her food was served a little later than everyone else's, but it worked out.”

Point of View

“Working with high-level artists is a huge challenge because you want to make sure that they're really taken care of. I've sometimes spent more time on a walk-through for a celebrity than I have in planning the rest of the day. When you ask a celebrity if there's anything they need, and they say ‘miso soup,’ and you're in the middle of something, you have to go out and find it. But if you're working with a good hotel, it really helps. A good hotel can find basically anything.”

MICHELE JACANGELO

Executive director of conferences and events, Billboard

So what do you think? Are V.I.P.s getting out of hand? Send your thoughts to edit@bizbash.com.