

## **Cafeteria Shows: Making The Best of A Bad Situation by Del Suggs**

**The best place** to have a concert is obvious-- a Concert Hall or Auditorium. Often these sites are unavailable (or undesirable) as a concert site, and the campus cafeteria is chosen as an alternative. A Cafeteria Show can be successful-- although the odds are against it. What it takes to have a good cafeteria show is extra effort on the part of the concert committee. The following are some suggestions from a veteran of many such shows.

### **Alternate Sites**

Perhaps the best idea is to find an adjacent site for the concert. If there is a lobby outside of the cafeteria, try to use it for the show. Perhaps you can rearrange the couches and chairs, and catch people leaving the cafeteria who will stay and listen. Maybe you could serve dessert in the lobby... or at least encourage diners to bring their ice cream into the lobby for the music. If you haven't guessed, I'm trying to discourage you from having entertainment in your dining hall.

Why? Because most people think you can simply stick a performer in the cafeteria and say "Play." This absolutely will not work. On any given campus, many students eat between 15-21 meals a week in the cafeteria. At just 30 minutes per meal, a total of 90 minutes a day, that can amount to 10 hours a week-- as much as a part-time job! As a result, students feel comfortable in the cafeteria. Remember "The Waltons" and "Leave It To Beaver"-- the dining table is a family place, a place of stability and reassurance that everything is okay. This is the best

and the worst reason to have a concert here.

It's the best reason because cafeteria dining is dull, boring, and repetitious, and a concert would really spice things up. It's the worst reason because Students Hate Surprises. They expect-- demand-- that their cafeteria experience remain the same as it always is.

For a cafeteria concert to be successful, you must make the cafeteria different and special for the show. You must also make the concert a special event, and make sure that your students know the show is a big deal. For this reason, if you decide to have a successful cafeteria show, you must do two things: convert the room, and convert the students.

### **Cafeteria Conversion**

Begin by analyzing the dining room. Realize that not everybody wants to be entertained at dinner; therefore, if there is a section of the room that can be separated or closed off, use it as the concert site. Find some way of setting aside one area-- a small area-- for the concert-goers. I suggest a small area, because it is better to have your audience crowded into a small area than scattered out across the room with empty tables and chairs in between.

Talk to and befriend the Cafeteria Management. Make sure that they are supportive of a show. Make sure they know that you will be responsible for restoring the cafeteria to its original condition after the show. Make sure they know that this show won't be any

more work for them. Ask if they can provide tablecloths, candles, and maybe even a special dinner the night of the show. If they are opposed to the show, you might as well forget it. But they are generally excited about the possibility of generating more business and satisfied customers. The main thing is to make sure they know there is no extra work involved for them. They need to know that you will be doing all the work, and they will simply share in the glory.

In the section of the hall set aside as the concert site, arrange for a stage, lights and sound (if required by the artist's rider). Make sure you can dim the overhead lights, or turn them off all together. It is vitally important that you set the mood-- the ambience-- for the show. Arrange to decorate the stage area with plants or props. Try to find table cloths and candles, at least for the tables up close to the stage.

Arrange the tables and chairs so that everyone is facing the stage, even if you have to remove chairs. This is very important for two reasons: it discourages talking; and it helps the audience pay attention to the show.

### **Converting the Students**

A week before the show, make sure the word gets out. Put up posters, use table tents, make announcements in the dining hall about the show, do what ever it takes to get the word out about this show. Make sure nobody walks into the cafeteria the night of the show and says "what's going on?". Remember, Students Hate Surprises.

## **Cafeteria Shows: Making The Best of A Bad Situation by Del Suggs**

Thirty minutes before the show: Turn off the TV, unplug the video games, cover the pool tables; turn off the music or radio. Dim the room lights fifteen minutes before the show begins. Have information (bios and fliers) on the tables telling about the artist for diners to read. You can copy the press release, or write your own blurb. Have an Emcee to introduce the act in a professional manner. Do everything you can to create the image that this is an important event. This is not just a "cafeteria gig." This is (ta-dah!) "Dinner Theatre."

### **It's Showtime**

Require that everyone on your committee be at the show-- sitting down front, enjoying and applauding. Every show needs a core audience to get the excitement and energy started. Fun is contagious, and you will quickly find that everybody has begun to appreciate the performance.

After the show: Allow time for an encore, don't just turn on the lights and run people out. Give your audience a moment to sit and relax, and meet the performer if they want. If the performer has CD's or tapes available, announce it from the stage and encourage people to come down. Let people visit with the artist without being pressured to get out of the room.

Talk personally to those in attendance and thank them for being there. The word of mouth advertising you will get from them is priceless. They may also want to become a member of your concert committee. Sign them up on the spot.

### **Return to Dullness**

Remember your promise to the Cafeteria Manager? Put everything back the way it was before the show. Rearrange the tables and chairs, put the plants back in the lobby, pick up all the table tents and fliers. Turn it back into the same old dull cafeteria it was before you converted it into (ta-dah!) "Dinner Theatre."

If you follow these guidelines, I can almost promise that you will have a good, successful cafeteria concert. If you don't, the show may still succeed... but the odds are more likely that it will bomb.

Frequently, cafeteria shows are seen as "disposable." They are generally less expensive acts, and since there is less money at stake, these shows are sometimes considered less important. That usually means that less effort is put into presenting these shows.

**It seems odd, but many schools actually put more effort into booking the acts for their cafeteria shows than they do in presenting the shows!** Think about what you do on your campus: you talk to artists and agents, you review promotional material, you listen to CDs and tapes, you watch videos, you meet with your committee, you discuss the various acts, and you eventually select the few best shows to present on your campus, for your students, in your cafeteria.

Some how, after all this effort to schedule great acts is forgotten after they are booked in the cafeteria. You might even start to think "how good can they be?

They're playing in my school cafeteria?"

**But don't forget: the act you are bringing in to perform in your cafeteria may have played a concert hall the night before.** Just because they are in your cafeteria doesn't mean they aren't great performing artists! Of course they are great. That's why you booked them!

The bottom line is this: You pay a lot of money for your performing artists, but it takes more than just booking a good act to ensure a good show. We can't do it all by ourselves-- we need your help to make it work. Give us the best possible conditions, and you will get twice your moneys worth.

**Copyright by Del Suggs  
Del@DelSuggs.com  
1-800-323-1976  
www.DelSuggs.com**