

Guidelines for Producing a Live Comedy Show

Document Purpose

The intent of this document is to provide new and up and coming live comedy producers with a guideline to support them in staging a show that is a positive experience for comics, audiences and venue managers. This in turn will support further growth of quality live comedy in Aotearoa.

Scope

The scope of this document encompasses open mic nights and paid line up shows. The guidelines in this document provide a good practice to producing a live comedy show. Due to numerous variables outside the control of even the most experienced producer, these guidelines are not a guarantee of success.

Contributors

This document has been reviewed and received input from experienced producers throughout Aotearoa. We thank them for their contribution.

Getting Started

Prior to producing a comedy show, it is recommended that the producer attend shows at an established comedy club and regular open mic nights. A majority of producers have either performed comedy or are regulars on the comedy circuit. This experience provides an understanding of the format, timing of sets performed and audience expectations.

Note: As with any profession, a well-executed event will be made to look easy, this is a benefit afforded by experience.

Objective

When producing a show, it is important to start with why it is being staged. It could be to build an audience, gain experience, fill a quiet night, a fundraiser for a charity or simply for profit. Once the objective is clear, it will provide input into further decisions such as advertising expenditure, ticket sales, selecting and paying comics. The objective is used to define what success looks like, take the time to establish this measure, e.g., 25 audience members.

Responsibility

When producing a show, overall responsibility for success/failure and issues which may arise lay with the producer, as does the safety of performers and audience members. A good rule of thumb, no one would be at the event if the producer hadn't staged the show.

Key Elements

The four key elements to any show are the venue, the producer, the comedians, and the audience. The catalyst for these elements to work together is communication. The set of guidelines in this document will focus on these elements and the catalyst.

Budget

If the objective is to make a profit, the importance of the budget will increase.

Income - For open mic shows, revenue could come from bar contribution or sponsorship. Ticket sales can assist in revenue for professional shows. While streaming services and TV coverage can generate revenue, this does complicate performer fees, if you have not done this previously, the Guild is available to help.

Expenses – Marketing, Performer Fees, Transport costs and Venue hire all need to be considered when considering the budget of a show.

Venue - Open mic nights, unless in an established club, are usually held in bars. This keeps the cost of staging the show to a minimum while potentially increasing revenue with more patrons for the establishment on a quiet night. Note: in the space being used, it is good to practice not have any other entertainment happening at the same time, TV screens playing sport etc.

Location - Does the venue have a good amount of foot traffic and what are the transport options? Foot traffic provides the opportunity for an increase in audience size while transport options will require further thought on how all participants will safely get to and from the show. Another key thing to agree up front is who is responsible for security. There would be nothing worse than an incident happening and both the venue and producer looking to each other to sort it out.

Layout - The optimal layout is a rectangle shaped room with a focal point toward where the comics will be performing. A sports bar playing content to the side of the room will split audience attention. While not always possible to find a layout like this, a place for the audience to comfortably gather with a focal point on the performers should be considered a minimum requirement.

Equipment - Does the venue have a PA system suitable for this type of show? If not, unless agreed with the venue manager, it is up to the producer to supply a microphone, amplifier and

speakers. The equipment needs to have enough power to project the comics voice clearly to the audience. A pre-show soundcheck is always recommended. Spotlights and dimmable house lights will add to the focus on the performers and provide a more professional feel.

Manager - The relationship with the venue manager is important. The manager needs the venue to make a profit, a show with no or less patrons than what is considered normal for that night will not last long. Always ensure expectations for the show (roles and responsibilities) are clearly agreed and any deals are confirmed in writing. Ideally, the manager will be open to adjusting seating/table layout to benefit the show. If the show becomes regular, maintain the relationship. If the show is not run well, the manager is likely to cancel and be less inclined to try another live comedy show.

Non-Bar - When considering a venue that isn't a bar, or not part of a bar space, the producer will need to look at; the cost of hireage, paying staff, local bylaws for licensing for the sale of alcohol and how the costs are covered, ticket sales or koha.

Ticketing - For a paid comedy show, tickets are purchased online and/or at the door. The layout of the room will need to facilitate checking and purchasing of tickets as audience members enter the room. There is no standard rate for ticketing, more experienced producers may be able to help setting the value.

Comedians - All performers, from raw comics through to established professionals deserve the same courtesy and respect as would be expected in any place of work. It is recommended that the NZ Comedy Guild Code of Conduct is read for more detail. Our comedy community is tight knit, if any issues occur due to conduct surrounding the show, the pool of comedians willing to perform will quickly decrease.

MC - For an open mic night, the MC is highly important. The job of the MC is to warm up the audience, set the ground rules for the audience, read and lift the mood of the room between each set if required as well as introduce each act. The MC will usually deliver 10 minutes of material at the start of the show and potentially another 10 minutes after a short break, halfway through the show. If payment is agreed, ensure this is in writing. Due to the responsibility of the role, established comedians are recommended for the role of MC.

Performer Expectations - Ensure all performers understand the amount of time allocated for a set, if the show is paid/unpaid, transport options, call times and any details on the expected audience they may be pertinent to content. If there is an issue with a performer running the light, showing up late or generally not adhering to the Code of Conduct, it is the producer's responsibility to raise and address the issue.



Payment - Disputes most often arise around terms of payment. If the show is paid, ensure that performers understand the terms, agree in writing and uphold the agreement. While rates of pay vary depending on profile, the minimum rate is outlined by the NZ Comedy Guild.

Safety - Pre, during and post the show, performer safety is of high importance. As mentioned above, safe transport options are to be considered, no threatening or bullying behaviour is to be tolerated by any person at the show.

Audience - Without an audience the live comedy show is no more than a workshop. While performers are encouraged to share the show on social media and to invite friends. Getting an audience to attend the show is the responsibility of the producer. For new producer looking to build an audience, this is the biggest challenge. As previously mentioned, a venue with a good amount of foot traffic may help. A headline performer who potential audience members are familiar may also assist in drawing in an audience.

Expectations - In established comedy venues, the audience will know what to expect. In a new venue this needs to be made clear, is the show family friendly or adult only, the duration, refreshment breaks, any themes and potentially the overall level of experience of the performers.

Hecklers - Any audience has the potential to have a heckler. More experienced performers and MC's will understand how to respond to the heckler. If the person is intoxicated, overly disruptive or abusive, it is the joint responsibility of the producer and venue manager to have the person removed.

Communication - The catalyst which brings the three key elements together is communication with the Audience, the Venue Manager and Comedians. Don't make any assumptions surrounding the gig or any participant.

Marketing - Prior to the show, the key communication with audience members is through marketing. As well as the basics of the show, Date, Time, Location, this is where audience expectations are set. While established producers will have built an audience and be able to market to them, a new producer simply posting the event on their own social media page will yield limited results. An established venue may have a mailing list which could be leveraged to reach a wider audience. Ensure that it is clear that both the venue and producer are promoting and if so that there is no conflict that may lead to overselling / underselling the show. If the producer is expecting the venue to also market the show this needs to be agreed and communicated as soon as possible. If a new producer is not familiar with social media marketing it is recommended that they engage with a subject matter expert.

Venue Manager - Double bookings leading to last minute show cancellations can be reduced through regular communication with the venue manager.

Comedians - Open Mic shows first need to be marketed to the people who may be interested in performing. We have numerous groups on social media which are dedicated to gig sign ups. As with audience marketing, this is where key details of the show are shared, will the comedians be paid or perform for free? List any realistic benefits of performing the show, stage time, travel costs, free or reduced-price refreshments etc.

Note: avoid using the word exposure, this is a running joke in many performing arts communities.

Once the show and performers are confirmed, it is important to establish and maintain contact with everyone involved. Whichever channel is used, it needs to be easy for everyone to receive timely updated and for the performers to let the producer or MC know if they have availability issues.

Producing a show: Quick Reference Guide

The following table provides the basics of producing a show.

Stage	Activity	Notes
Ideation	Define a clear objective with a measure of success.	Provides clear understanding of the purpose of the event
	Familiarise yourself with the local comedy community through attending/performing gigs.	Provides an understanding of how shows function.
Discovery	Investigate potential venues.	Approach venue managers with the idea. Note: Having own equipment will provide more flexibility in venue selection.
	Budget	Early on, establish a budget for the event, this could include venue hire, performance fees etc.
Planning	Confirm dates with the venue manager.	All details confirmed in writing.
	Advertise for comedians.	A venue, date and performers are required prior to marketing. Payment

		terms (if any) agreed in writing.
	Confirm equipment availability/suitability for venue.	Prevents last minute technical issues
Execution	Market the show.	Social Media and/or traditional channels.
	Confirm details with the Venue Manager.	Maintain regular contact to keep booking.
	Establish communications with comedians.	Confirm call times, ask if all performers can safely commute to the show.
	Share the line up with comics.	This can be done by the producer or MC. Provides flexibility in call times.
	Perform Show.	Note any issues that can be prepared for next time, any successes that can be repeated and any feedback that could improve the next show.
Post Show	If payment agreed, confirm timing with performers.	Pay on time and in full.
	Check in with venue manager.	Any feedback on show, any changes to be made
	Did the show meet all success measures?	Lessons learnt.