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How To Interview Your Potential DJ

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You expect your DJ to have a good music selection, professional equipment, and good service. But these are things you should not take for granted. The DJ biz is unregulated; there is no such thing as a DJ license; no such thing as a DJ inspection. In other words, anyone can get into the DJ business. This fact has produced innumerable DJs but many of them lack the credentials and professionalism required to do weddings and other important milestone events. So how do you know who's who before you hire him? You interview them! This article will tell you how to assess a potential candidate, and will present some specifics you should require of your DJ.

How should you assess a potential DJ?

To begin with, you need to have a clear understanding of what you want your DJ to do, how you want him to look and act, and what music you want played, before you can find the perfect DJ for your event. This is where you start. Do you want him to be more interactive or low key? Do you want Big Band music or do you want Top 40? These are questions only you can answer and you need to interview yourself before you interview your DJ.

Next, you have to realize it is your job to find the right DJ. The DJ who shows up at your event might be perfect for a night club environment, but all wrong for your event! Therefore, once you know what you want from your DJ, it is critical that you ask the right questions, listen carefully to his responses, and read between the lines. Try to eliminate the obvious bad candidates quickly. You can probably do this in a phone screen. Then, meet with a few good potentials and probe further.

Above all, realize you are buying a service, not a widget. You are entering into a relationship with someone with whom you will be working for the next several months. Further, you are placing him in charge of a significant aspect of your most important milestone event. Make sure he views it as such and not as just another Saturday night gig. He will be helping to shape the most significant day of your life. Therefore, make sure he is a person you can work with and that he is qualified to render the results you are looking for.

Finally, avoid asking questions with which he can simply answer yes or no. Ask open ended questions instead. Don't ask, "Do you use pro audio equipment?" Rather, say to him, "Tell me about the gear you will be bringing to my wedding," and listen carefully to him. Tell him to describe; ask him how, what, why; ask for supporting evidence; etc. Don't let him get off easy with a yes or no answer.

Now that you know how to interview him, it's time to address some specifics.

What specific qualifications should you look for?

First, you should establish his status in the DJ business. Ask about his credentials. How long has he been a DJ; what kind of training does he have; does he have references; how many events has he done similar to yours, etc. Ask if he is a

member of any professional DJ organizations like the American DJ Association or the National Association of Mobile Entertainers, to name just two. These organizations require their members to adhere to strict ethics and also provide training to their members. They also require hefty membership dues; something a fly-by-night DJ may not be willing to pay in exchange for the credibility these organizations can provide. Be sure to ask to see a membership card or certificate since anyone can claim to be a member without offering proof. The point here is to weed out the wannabes, fly-by-nighters, first-timers, and bottom feeders.

Second, your DJ should be a savvy business person. This means he will have all his ducks in a row when it comes to his business and this will redound to your benefit. He should be registered as a business in his state and should be prepared to offer proof. That he is a registered business means he is accountable to someone other than himself. This does not mean he should show you his tax records. But if all his work is done in the shadows you will have a tougher time if you have to go to the state Attorney General's office about an issue with a non-existent business.

Being a savvy business person often means one has to spend money to make money. Sure, a savvy business person will find ways to cut costs when we can; but if your DJ appears to be doing everything on the cheap, chances are you have found yourself a fly-by-night operator. At this point it is better to move on to the next DJ on your list of potentials.

Third and closely related to the previous point, your DJ should have liability insurance. In fact, many venues require all the wedding vendors to have insurance. You might be without entertainment on your wedding day when the venue requests to see his certificate and he doesn't have one. Ask about liability insurance when you interview your DJ and request to see the certificate.

Fourth, your DJ should look and act professional. If he does not show up for your interview, don't book another one with him! We are all late every now and then, so you might want to give him some leeway here; but he should call you and let you know he's tied up in traffic. How he looks at your first meeting is another important point and may be a clue to how he will look on your wedding day. Make sure he has the proper attire for your wedding whether it is a custom-tailored tux or a nice business suit. You don't want him showing up in jeans, a wife-beater t-shirt, and gold chains around his neck on your wedding day.

Ok...he says he has a suit, but does it fit him and does it look nice? Image will be very important on your wedding day. A DJ friend told me recently she could have gotten me a \$69 tux the other day if she had only known my size. I thanked her and told her I am not in the market for a tux at the moment (but I didn't tell her I do not wear \$69 tuxedos!). Perhaps you've heard the remark, "...all over him like a cheap suit!" There is truth to that! Your DJ should look sharp. It's ok to ask for a picture!

Fifth, ask your DJ about his music in detail. It doesn't matter if he is using vinyl records or CDs or MP3s. But it might matter where he gets his music. If he downloads it illegally from the Internet, you might want to think twice. Ask if he subscribes to a professional DJ music service like Prime Cuts, Promo Only, or Top Hits USA. Those subscription services are very expensive. But they provide the DJ with the chart toppers the week they come out. This is important since, though you want your DJ to have older music too, you don't want him to have ONLY older music. He should have a good mix of music across several eras and across several genres, especially if you are hiring him for a wedding.

Get a sense of how much music he has as well. In a 4-hour reception, the DJ will only play about 60-80 songs. That's not many. But if he has only 100 songs to begin with, it's likely he won't have the selection of music to cover requests.

A DJ can't collect every song out there. But if he doesn't have that special song you want for your first dance, ask him if he will go out and buy it. If he is willing to do so, that's a point in his favor. If he refuses, walk away. Understand how he plays his music too. Don't hire a scratch DJ if you don't want to hear "wiki-wiki-wha" all night long! Make sure you are getting a wedding DJ, not a club DJ.

Sixth, don't overlook his gear. If you have no idea how to distinguish between good equipment and junk, this might be a more difficult aspect to judge. You really don't care about the specs of his equipment; all you really care about is that you get the results you want on your wedding day. But his gear should be pro audio gear from major brand names in the business like Crown, QSC, EV, Numark, Pioneer, Denon, JBL, and so forth. If it is Radio Shack or home stereo gear, let him go and find a real DJ.

Second-hand equipment is ok as long as it works and as long as it looks nice. But you don't want a heap of junk or a crazy Rube Goldberg contraption in the corner of your otherwise elegant affair. If it is good quality, your DJ probably takes good care of it. A few dings and scratches might not indicate junk. You have to realize DJ equipment gets shoved into and out of vans every weekend and it is undoubtedly going to get knocked around a bit. Professional equipment is built to handle the abuse. Allow the DJ to talk about his equipment to get a good sense of it's worth and ability and you might even ask for pictures. Again, this is a difficult assessment for some people, but get as much information as you can.

Seventh, anyone can push the play button. For your wedding, you want more than that. You need to be certain the DJ you hire is going to give you the customer service you desire and your event requires. Your DJ should be willing to work with you long before the day of your event. He should find out every detail about your wedding reception and then go to work to fulfill it. He should learn the idiosyncrasies of your particular venue, consult with your other vendors, and stay in touch with you for last minute changes. When your day arrives, he should be set up before your first guest arrives, greet you when you arrive with the bridal party, and then step through your agenda, coordinating every event with your other vendors and keeping a vigil against contingencies. His primary concern should be his attentive service to you and your guests and to your event in general. When you hire him, ask him how he will demonstrate his customer service and then make clear to him what you expect. Remember, you are not making a once-and-done widget purchase; you are buying his services. He should be willing to do everything within reason to keep his client happy.

Finally, if your DJ shows up at your wedding having everything in place, is standing tall and looking good, meets or surpasses your customer service expectations, and brings about your desired results, then please consider passing his name on to your friends and family who are in need of a DJ. This DJ will have earned your referral. Besides that, you will have made their interview process a lot easier for the people to whom you refer his service.

Will Stephens is owner of **4Most Sound & Light** based in the Philadelphia suburbs and serves all of the Delaware Valley. Before starting his own DJ company, he apprenticed with 4 other DJs, serving as an unpaid roadie and apprentice in order to learn the business. Beyond that, he was a professional clown for 9 years, entertaining children and adults. Will is available for private parties, corporate affairs, and of course, your wedding event. You can see his website at www.4MostSound.com or contact him at 215-498-0353 or DJ@4MostSound.com.