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How To Choose A Disc Jockey

by Scott Ebright, [Ebright Entertainment Enterprises](#)

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In this era of Disc Jockey entertainment, chances are you've heard horror stories about "a terrible DJ" that performed for a party or reception. Now that it's your turn to hire a DJ, you can avoid making the wrong decision. Hiring a mediocre or bad DJ can be avoided if you ask the right questions and take the correct steps. Read this article all the way through; then go back and take notes on the points most important to you.

From California to the East Coast, DJ's come in 3 varieties: bad, average, and outstanding. For every 10 Disc Jockeys - 4 are bad - 5 are average - and 1 is outstanding. This is why the Disc Jockey field is proliferated by hundreds of horror stories. There are simply more average and mediocre DJ's than outstanding ones. They may seem great to certain people who don't party very much, but when compared to the performance of an outstanding DJ, the differences are embarrassing.

MUSIC CAN MAKE OR BREAK YOUR WEDDING! Everyone's heard that famous saying before, but when it comes down to decision time, how many brides actually throw their common sense out the window to save a couple of hundred bucks? Brides seldom hear complaints about the terrible or "cheap DJ" they hired...simply because her friends and relatives don't want to insult her or be rude.

Before you begin DJ shopping, you need to be honest with yourself. Do you want to **IMPRESS** your guests? Or, just give them a human jukebox? In most cases, **YOU WILL GET EXACTLY WHAT YOU PAY FOR**. Never look at your purchase of a DJ like the purchase of a tangible item like food or the rental cost of a hall. When it comes to quality entertainment, there is little room for bargain shopping. Surveys show that 2 out of 3 guests agree that music can make or break the event.

Although you usually get what you pay for, this rule doesn't always apply. Bad DJ's can use slick telemarketing tactics and "sweet talk" you into paying a premium rate. On the other hand, not all the "outstanding" DJ's are the best salesmen. The average cost for DJ's for prime time Saturdays in larger population areas is about \$900 to \$1,400 for a four-hour period (overtime going for \$150-\$250 per hour.) In smaller population centers or rural areas, this price range will be more like \$500 to \$800.

HINT: It doesn't hurt to ask for a discount if your event is on any other day than Saturday. Most entertainers' calendars are more flexible during this time and will tend to discount their rates.

Don't get sidetracked into a discussion of hourly rates. DJ's should be booked as a package...just like live bands. **EXAMPLE:** Plumbers charge by the hour because they can easily fill their day with appointments making quick house calls. They grab a toolbox, jump in the truck and off they go! DJ's don't have this flexibility with all the equipment they have to lug around and the set-up time requirement. If a DJ charges for only 2 hours, then how will they make up the 3-hour difference in income for that same day? Most brides book weddings for at least 4 hours. DJ's know they can base their cost and profit on this average.

So, unlike a plumber making a quick service call, the DJ faces a much higher level of equipment logistics. Considering this fact, it just isn't feasible to discount loading time, labor costs and other operating costs since the costs are always fixed.

The conclusion? DJ's that offer hourly rates are often times "newcomers" who are less knowledgeable about the economics of operating an entertainment business. They drastically cut their overhead and use cheaper equipment (among other shortcuts) that will be embarrassingly obvious.

What are the main differences between pros and part-time weekend hobbyists? Several points should be considered. Use the guide below when screening a DJ. Be careful not to come off sounding like an interrogator. Instead, ask the following questions in a friendly and

relaxed, easy-going manner...

In order of importance:

THE VOICE! How do you make announcements? Somewhere along the line, people often forget one of the first requirements to ask the DJ: Do they have a trained announcer's voice? While speaking to your DJ on the phone or in person, do you feel confident that your guests will be impressed with your choice of DJ? He or she will be your official representative when making announcements! Is their VOICE rich and resonate ...enunciating clearly and commanding attention? Or, does their voice sound average...sounding like anyone else? Try a flash quiz on your DJ candidate: "Let me hear how you would ask our guests to be seated." Or ask them, "How will you announce our grand entrance coming into the reception hall?"

Will you be the DJ who performs, or will it be someone else?

Always talk directly to the actual DJ you are contracting. An agent or office representative is okay for booking, but don't sign anything until you have talked to your actual DJ. Be wary of major "bluff" tactics or stalling techniques to change the subject at this point. If the DJ you originally wanted is not available, BEWARE! A great DJ can always refer a bad DJ if the booking commission or "kick-back" is the right price.

How many shows have you performed and for how many years?

If you are dubious of the DJ's answer, politely request if the DJ has documentation to back up his claims. If the DJ balks at your request or puts up a smoke screen...pass. There are other DJ's out there with more integrity and experience.

Do you have references that I can talk to?

Start with INDUSTRY professionals first: catering managers, hotels, resorts, booking agents, photographers and videographers. These businesses see hundreds of DJ's every year and know how to judge quality. Unfortunately, there is a growing trend of professionals who get paid "finder's fees" or kick-back commissions for referrals. Ask them point blank if they do. If so, avoid them immediately! They have no objectivity. Move on to another vendor/reference from the same field (photography, videographer, etc.) who does the SAME thing. Chances are slim that any enterprising DJ will have "sweetheart deals" with every photographer in town! Lastly, call 3 or 4 former customers the DJ has performed for and review thank you notes that the DJ has saved.

4 ways to rate a DJ:

1) DJ's personality, 2) promptness, 3) attitude, 4) crowd-pleasing ability.

In your questioning of references, use these four categories to ask questions.

What does your equipment consist of? What does it look like?

Basics should include: (1) digital music players (Computer software/hardware, CD players, or MiniDisc players), (2) high-quality stereo amplifier(s), (3) a mixer for microphone and music,

(4) at least 2 speakers capable of filling a room without distorting, (5) 2 microphones (one should be a high-quality wireless mic for toasts, etc.). Be suspicious of the professional caliber of anyone still using turntables and records in today's world! (unless you want of rap, techno, rave or alternative music).

Can you send us a songlist so we can view your overall music selection? Can we make requests? How many? Can we specify what you SHOULD NOT play?

Ask to review the DJ's library - again without sounding testy or like an interrogator.

Contemporary DJ's have computerized lists of their song library. 15,000 songs is a good indicator of the DJ has a good variety of music. A confusing or disorganized song library is a bad omen, so steer clear of that DJ, no matter what their excuse is. Smart DJ's categorize their music by decades, then the style of music within each of those decades. Ironically, some DJ's try to force their musical tastes onto their audiences. Like the jerk playing loud, blasting rap music waiting at the traffic light. You won't need that ego and attitude forcing their favorite brand of music at your event.

Do you use computer songs (.mp3's, compact discs, digital audiotape (DAT), cassette tapes or records?

Find out what percentage of the music library is made up of each of these mediums. Serious pros are strictly using computerized music and software these days. Records indicate a DJ bias towards Hip-Hop or techno music. They also sound bad and skip. Cassettes are a joke, so definitely avoid DJ that uses this 25 year-old technology. DAT's are digitalized tapes, but they take too long to cue up and they wear out eventually -just like cassette tape.

Can I control the volume?

No DJ should ever have any problems with this minor request.

Do you mind if I ask...what is your age?

No legal violations here...you're not hiring an employee, just renting a contractor for a few hours. We all know the difference between growing up with certain music as opposed to reading about music styles from different eras in a published song list from Billboard or Mobile Beat. Note: younger DJs lean more towards rap, progressive rock, hard rock, techno and alternative. Older DJ's are less knowledgeable about these newer styles but more experienced on the whole rest of the world of music...from the 1920's to the present.

Does your price include lighting? What kind?

Conservative is better for weddings. Wild crazy lights and effects are good for certain types of parties. It's all according to your taste.

Do you arrive self-contained, or do we need to provide anything?

Pros arrive self-contained and don't need a thing except a space to set up and a 110-volt, 20 amp electrical outlet. Note the cosmetic appearance of the equipment. Some DJs are tasteful and creative and have a clean, modern look. Many average DJ's still use 6 or 8 foot banquet

tables to set equipment on. Their equipment can look more sloppy and will probably have tacky cords hanging everywhere. Plus those big tables eat up too much space.

How long does it take you to set up?

30-60 minutes is average. Some DJs use an assistant for this. If so, verify what this assistant will wear and where they will be during the reception. Do you want the assistant to eat food and dance with your guests? Clarify with the DJ what the assistant's total role will be. Lastly, under no circumstances should you have to pay a DJ for the labor in setting-up their equipment or travel time under an hour! (Would you charge your boss for the time it takes you in the morning to "prep" for work? OR, how would your boss feel about paying you for your commute time driving to work everyday?)

Can you go overtime if everything is going well?

Discuss this in advance. If so, how much \$ and who gives the official "OKAY" to keep going. When does the money get paid, by whom and in what form (cash, check, travelers check, charge, etc)?

Will you let us use an extra microphone?

For toasts, singer, or announcements.

What type of background music do you play for cocktails or dinner?

(Make sure it's not all a Kenny G CD!)

Besides announcements, how much do you talk? What type of things do you say?

(DJ should know when to talk and when to SHUT UP!).

Can you give me some examples of how your experience helped you "ad-lib" when an emergency arose?

This might tell you how experienced and professional your DJ is.

Do you charge for travel time or mileage?

What will you wear? A tuxedo?

Happy hunting! I hope all of this information helps you on your "Disc Jockey Quest"!

Scott Ellison Ebright

Owner/Performer

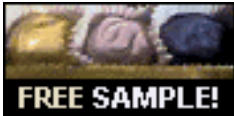
(916) 416-0895

(800) 779-0019

Ebright Entertainment Enterprises

**P.O. Box 215223
Sacramento, CA 95821**

**Ebright Enterprises
P.O. Box 15155
Santa Rosa, CA 95402**



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