

**CIO Dinner Nights**  
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Surprisingly, IT managers do not associate very much with their peers. They may meet during events like advisory teams or special community events, but overall they do not have the opportunities to get to know each other. This is what the “CIO Dinner Nights” capitalize on.

Here’s a rundown of the planning and strategy behind this event.

1. Make your invitation list. We invite Directors and CIOs. About five years ago, we altered the way our program was staffed. We put a faculty member with sales experience at the head of the program. And so I spend around two to three days a week visiting local companies. That means that, in a way, we’re inviting friends to the dinner. However, we also use the event to invite new people. If you need help on who to invite, check with your local AITP chapter. They will have a list of local IT professionals. And they may also want to partner with you. They make great partners.
2. Set the vision, lay the ground rules. This is an opportunity for local IT managers to get to know their peers. But these events cannot turn into an event where vendors that are working with you to market their products. Be clear up front. No selling during the event.
3. Pick your venue. We use the Bonefish Grill and a local steak house. We chose Wednesday or Thursday night and planned to start the event at 6:00pm. Be in the bar for around 30 to 45 minutes to meet people as they arrive. Be sure to take each guest around and introduce them to the others. Let your vendors help in this task. They will love it. Remember: no selling.
4. Accommodate the vendor sponsors. This provides the opportunity for the vendors that are going to help sponsor the event to have time to personally meet the guest in a casual environment. This is the “win” for the vendors. They will meet, shake hands with, talk to, and pass out their business cards to more people that can influence their sales than they normally meet in a month. They will actually meet people that they can never see. Most CIOs and Directors are careful of meeting sales people.
5. There is no agenda, only an invitation. Remember that this is a non-formal dinner meeting future friends.
6. Find your sponsor. Select three vendors you have close ties with to sponsor the event. Ask them to agree to split the bill. For 25 people, the bill will be around \$2500.00. Eight hundred dollars to meet 25 people that can make buying decisions is the best deal they will ever get.

Other things to keep in mind:

- \* Make sure to pick companies that do not overlap in the products they market.
- \* You will find some companies will offer to pick up the complete bill themselves if they are the only vendor. We let Microsoft do this one year and I was not pleased with it.
- \* Use the time during the open bar to walk around and introduce the three vendors to the IT directors.

\* Make sure that you introduce each of them during the meal and stress your close working relationship with them. I also make sure their business cards are at each place setting. I refer to the card when I introduce them.

\* Make sure the three vendors are spread out at the table among the guests. This gives each of them the opportunity to get to know the guest in a friendly environment.

7. Involve your administration. Have upper management from the college attend the event. Let one of these “higher-ups” thank everyone for attending and stress the college’s commitment to the local community.

8. Provide thank-you gifts. Have a nice gift for each person. We do pens or coffee cups with their names on them.

9. Wrap it up around 9pm.

Looking ahead, we are trying to find a new format. We’d like to increase the number of companies we work with from around 30 to at least 45. That size of group will be hard for a non-formal dinner. We’re also thinking about finding a speaker who is someone this group would want to hear and whom we can afford.