

Strategic Planning & Time Scheduling

Careful planning is the secret of a successful event, and this means starting well in advance – whether months ahead or even years.

Remember you may be in competition with other events for visitors, preferred dates, facility hire such as marquees, ‘portaloos’ etc, so the sooner you book your requirements the sooner you can relax and start planning the details.

The three key decisions to make are:

1. What?

Having an idea is the start of the planning process. Big ideas often start small – some of the biggest established festivals started as modest, one-off events – so if you think you have a good idea for a special event, research it further and test it on other people. It is often useful to carry out a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to help you consider all possible aspects. [See Strategic Planning] You also need to check that the idea is financially viable. [See Managing Your Money]

2. When?

What is the best time for the event? Try to avoid clashes with similar events and work with other organisers to realise the benefits of joint planning and promotion.

Never underestimate how long it takes to plan an event and don’t leave anything to the last minute. You need time to put together teams of staff and volunteers; time to raise funds; time to involve all the necessary community, council and other bodies; time to obtain permissions and licences [See Permissions]; and time to publicise and promote the event. [See Planning a Marketing Campaign]

3. Where?

Choosing the right venue is very important. What is the best location for the event? Could you use private and public spaces not normally used for such activities? Estimating the numbers of anticipated visitors is an essential part of determining where your event will happen - buildings will often have maximum numbers imposed by fire regulations, and limits will be imposed on outside areas by local authorities or the police for health and safety reasons. You should draw up a site plan, including all front of house (what the customer sees) and backstage (what happens behind the scenes) activities, to help you be realistic. If your event happens to cross local authority boundaries, bear in mind that you will need to contact all the same officials in both areas.

Time Scheduling

You may think you know what needs to be done in planning your event, but timing is often crucial. Your event is the deadline – it’s no good finishing off tasks after this date! The best way to approach planning is to draw up a timetable of what needs to be done when: fix your dates as soon as possible, so they can be advertised at an early stage; draw up your budget and start fundraising as most funding bodies take several weeks or months to consider your application, and will discount any expenditure incurred prior to confirmation of their award; when planning your publicity campaign, remember that some magazines have very long lead times.

See Sample Timetable

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Some useful tools

See Event Planning Practical Checklist for a useful list of things to be considered.

Flow Chart

A simple flow chart can help you to think about all the tasks that need doing, and in what order.

Gantt Chart

A Gantt chart is a useful tool for working out when activities should begin, how long they will take, and which tasks can be carried out concurrently. They can be drawn up on paper, or using a spreadsheet, you can also purchase specific project management software, which will help you produce Gantt Charts. The basic format is to have time along the top using an appropriate scale (days, weeks or months), and activities down the side. You need to work back from the date of your event, and fill in when each activity should take place, and how long it will take to complete. [See Sample Gantt Chart] You could begin with a chart covering the 12 months leading up to your event, with general activities marked. As you approach the time of your event, you could draw up another much more detailed chart covering the last few weeks, and then a final chart covering the last few days.

Entertainment and Artists

Well known performers will book up well in advance, and if your event is during holiday time (such as Christmas or summer) you need to book your entertainment months ahead. You should issue a basic contract, contracting the artist to perform on the terms you have agreed – everything you have agreed should be written down to avoid any confusion later. Don't forget they will need rehearsal time, and also changing facilities either on site or nearby.

They may also need travel and accommodation arranging. [NB during summer weekends, many smaller hotels may book up with weddings, so you need to reserve accommodation as early as possible.]

Staffing

Your staffing needs may include both paid staff and volunteers. [See Volunteer Programme] You may need to advertise for senior posts, so allow plenty of time for interviews and for successful candidates to give notice to a previous employer.

Publicity

When planning your advertising campaign, remember that the glossy magazines tend to work to a very long lead time (3 months or more). The best publicity is when you don't have to pay for it! Write a good press release whenever there is a new story to tell [See How to Write a Press Release] and send it out to the appropriate publications with a view to getting some editorial. Some magazines will give you some free editorial if you place an advert with them.

Useful Information:

Voluntary Arts Network
<http://www.voluntaryarts.org>

Other Related Information Sheets

How to Write a Press Release
Managing Your Money
Permissions
Planning a Marketing Campaign
Strategic Planning
Volunteer Programme

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