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PARKS & RECREATION AT WORK



Playing to the Crowd

Expert tips on planning a successful event

By Danielle Taylor

Park-organized events at local and state parks can range from small fitness classes to heavily-attended Independence Day celebrations, and each one requires the organizer(s) to develop a unique plan for coordinating a successful program. Event management is more and more becoming a distinct profession, but in the budget-crunched field of parks and recreation, many employees primarily tasked to other duties may find themselves in charge of organizing the local Little League Championship or the summer outdoor movie series.

If this sounds like you, or your agency has a need and you're willing to step up, it's worth cultivating your skills to plan the

most efficient and enjoyable events possible. As you'll soon learn, there's a lot more to effective event planning than just making sure you have food, activities, and staff available.

Establishing Your Baseline

Before you start recruiting volunteers, scheduling performance groups, or making budget requests, do your homework to establish a realistic, workable program. "People will buy into a good-enough vision," says Steve Schmader, president and CEO of the International Festivals & Events Association. "You must learn how to research and sell returns on investments, benefit identifications, etc."

If your program shows considerable forethought, smart planning, exciting

highlights, and strong attendance numbers, you'll be much more successful in convincing others to contribute to your event. For example, when planning your budget proposal, call around to different vendors to compare estimates, then present your recommendations along with the alternatives in a professional format. If the event requires a large area, such as a geocaching championship or a sports tournament, have a map drawn up that shows the size and location of each individual component. Work out a manageable schedule that provides constant interest to attendees, and determine exactly how many staffers/volunteers you'll need for each section, how long they will stay at their posts, and what role they'll play.

Once you're confident in your plan and



are familiar enough with all of the different sections of your proposal, you can approach your budget manager, potential sponsors, marketing team, etc., and begin to put your plans in place.

Building Your Team

Although your given budget may not have room for spectacularly appointed programs, it's still possible to host exciting events at no cost to the public. You may be surprised at how many businesses are willing to sponsor your event in return for free publicity. Present your event proposal to businesses in scale to the size of your event (e.g., local mom-and-pops for small group gatherings, larger corporations with a local presence for your biggest annual celebration) and lay out ways they can participate. Emphasize benefits you can offer, such as acknowledgement in program and marketing materials, discounts or event apparel for employees, admission to VIP-only sections, etc. Then make your request. Depending on the size of your event, a tiered system with

increasing levels of benefits and publicity for larger contributions may appeal to your potential sponsors.

"Sponsors today want an honest exchange of their assets for possible benefits that an event can provide," says Vern Biaett, a professor of special events management at Arizona State University. "If a sign [with a sponsor's name or logo] is seen by 10,000 guests, that has real value for a sponsor."

Once you've developed your plan, secured your sponsors, and have a good idea of your working budget, you'll be able to more precisely estimate the size and strength of the volunteer corps you'll need to staff your event. However, don't assume that more is always better in terms of helping hands. "A lot of times, organizations overreact to what their need is," says Florence May, president of The Registration System (TRS), a special event-management software company. "Rather than focusing on finding the right people, they focus on a number. Frequently, they need fewer people

if they've done a good job going out and seeking the right people." Especially when it comes to larger events, you may not get to know each volunteer personally, but if you effectively prepare team leaders to recruit, train, and supervise smaller crews, managing the entire team becomes significantly simpler.

Joelle Baugher, account manager and contracting coordinator for TRS, adds, "Once you define what the jobs are, where you want the volunteers, and what kinds of things you want them doing, a lot of ideas for where to find volunteers will become obvious." For example, high school and college students who are studying parks and recreation-related topics can often use volunteer experience for class credit, and community organizations are often more than willing to lend a hand.

Getting the Word Out

Of course, the most exciting event in the world will be dead if the public doesn't know it exists, so it's important to present your information in an easy-to-understand

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format. Start by building a website for your event or a dedicated page on your park and recreation agency’s website, and have this be the public’s ultimate source for information. “If you can only do one thing, make a good website,” advises Schmader. “All of your other efforts should direct people to your website.”

Once your website is in place, the next step is to alert the appropriate audiences. “The most cost-effective way [for a park and recreation agency to market an event] is to build a partnership with the media,” says Schmader. An in-kind partnership has many of the same qualities as a sponsorship, in that you agree to promote their brand if they promote your event. Local media outlets, such as TV news channels, popular radio stations, newspapers, and community websites may agree to provide marketing assistance for your event or include it on their community calendar.

No 21st-century event is complete without social media announcements, so if you haven’t already, play up your event through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and more. Be sure to include your website link and a few details of what attendees can expect. And don’t be afraid to get creative and plan ahead with your marketing,

especially if the event is an annual celebration. You can get a lot of interest in next year’s event simply by walking around the grounds of this year’s celebration and providing a narrated tour of what’s going on, then posting it to YouTube and using it for future marketing.

Carla Pendergraft, a Texas-based social media expert and web designer, also advises that event planners turn to other web resources you may not necessarily associate with event announcements. “For ticketed events, it’s a great idea to post tickets on Craigslist shortly before the event,” she advises. “‘For sale—tickets’ is a good category, or ‘Activities’ if it’s a free event.”

Flash deal sites are quickly becoming a popular way to alert a huge audience about your event, but if a marketing attempt isn’t planned well, an agency can actually lose money in the process, Pendergraft warns. “Many events and festivals are having good luck on LivingSocial and Groupon, but it has to be timed so that the cut-rate deals don’t cannibalize your full-price ticket sales. The closer to the event it is, the less likely it is to hurt your regular sales. And it needs to be a surprise; if the deal is advertised, people will wait to buy it on one of the deals sites rather than paying full price.”

Lastly, traditional announcement

methods work just as well as they always have, so print out a stack of brightly colored flyers and post them to community message boards in local parks, coffee shops, libraries, grocery stores, and other public places.

The Big Day

By the day of your event, all of the planning details should be smoothed out, with all of your materials and staff members/volunteers in place. If you’ve delegated appropriately, the day should run relatively smoothly, though it’s wise to expect little, manageable hiccups such as running out of hot dogs, having to rearrange the performance lineup due to traffic delays, or dealing with broken equipment.

Once it’s over, be sure to thank and acknowledge your volunteers and sponsors for their contributions, and ask them to provide feedback on what they thought went well and what could improve for future events. Effective event planning is a constant learning process, so keep your eyes and ears open for new ideas. And remember, the purpose of your event is to provide an entertaining, engaging venue where your community can gather and enjoy local highlights, so keep the big picture in mind and allow the rest to fall into place. ✨

Event Management School for Parks and Recreation Professionals January 20-25, 2012

In partnership with the International Festivals & Events Association (IFEA), NRPA offers Event Management School each January to provide park and recreation professionals with industry-specific training for organizing effective, well-attended events. This two-year program offers practical education for both novice and experienced event planners with hands-on, real-world applications. Year One students will learn how to define their event, work through the business details, build planning

and staffing teams, gather sponsorships, market their event, and evaluate its success upon its completion. Year Two students take an in-depth look at event design, financial management, brand building, contingency planning, accessibility, sustainable planning, and more. The next session will be held from January 20–25, 2013, at the Oglebay Resort and Conference Center in Wheeling, West Virginia. For more information, visit www.nrpa.org/event-school. ✨