

## Building a Festival from Scratch

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As a native of Fredericksburg, home to more than 60 special events and festivals each year, I am commonly asked questions about how to start a new event or bolster an existing one.

A festival can be one of the most exciting and fun ways to both attract visitors to your city and celebrate what makes your city and its residents special. But festivals also require many resources—including money—and, more importantly, thought, time, creativity, and a willingness to look at things differently.

While there is no cookie-cutter method of establishing a festival or event, the following five steps are the keys to creating the proper environment for event success.

### STEP ONE

Determine a purpose or need. The decision to create and sponsor an event should be made with the same level of consideration as deciding to get married. After all, you will be responsible for that event for better or worse and in good times and bad. This is not meant to scare anyone from the joy of starting an event, but merely to drive across the importance of answering the following types of questions when deciding to establish an event. Is there a need for a festival in our city? What is our goal(s)? What benefits will the event bring to the city and/or sponsoring organization?

The answers to these questions will not only clarify your decision, but will also serve as the foundation on which you will build your event.



### STEP TWO

Determine an appropriate theme. Just because another city has a successful Mardi Gras, craft affair, or music fest does not mean the same theme will work well in your city. When deciding your theme, let your creativity run wild! Your theme should be unique to your area. Focus on what makes Yourtown, Texas, different from any other town.

Also consider a theme that would easily capture media attention. We've all heard about the Fire Ant Festival in Marshall, Texas, because of its snappy,

offbeat theme. And each year they have done a great job upping the ante (no pun intended) in adding punch to their clever concept.

Think of a theme that will support a large number of complementing activities. Make a list of all the possible things you could do at your festival that would support the theme, and then pick the theme with the longest list. You don't need to commit to implementing all of these ideas in the first year; in fact, it is wise to leave room for growth and longevity through continued theme development.

### STEP THREE

Create a framework for success. Even the best seed in the world needs fertile ground in which to grow, and festivals are no different. Creating a solid organizational structure with well-defined goals and objectives is tantamount to building a great festival. Think of your festival as a new business. You wouldn't invest in starting a new company without finding the ideal location, writing a business plan, and defining the job responsibilities of your employees (who are your volunteers, in the case of a festival).

And you would never start a business without creating a realistic budget and income forecast. Remember: Not-for-profit is a tax status, not an operating philosophy. While most festivals do not turn a profit in the first year, it is important to make the event cover costs and generate profits as quickly as possible.

### STEP FOUR

Involve the citizens; they are your partners in this endeavor. From the very beginning, you must make the citizens aware of what you are doing and give them a sense of ownership in the event. After all, the residents of your city will serve as a pool of much needed volunteers. In addition, they will make up a percentage of the people who will attend the event. And they own the businesses or have the contacts that you will count on for sponsorship dollars. Make it THEIR event, and they will make it a success.

In 1996, Fredericksburg celebrated its 150th anniversary with a ten-day festival featuring nearly 100 separate activities at ten different locations throughout the county. The citizenship of 7,500 people was asked for ideas and support for a three-year period prior to the event. They responded by supplying more than 4,000 volunteers and more than \$250,000 in sponsorships and donations. Without their help, not

even one-tenth of the event concept would have been accomplished.

### STEP FIVE

Think cooperatively in everything you do. The key to surviving is working together. Each quarter, the Travel Division of the Texas Department of Transportation produces a calendar of events for the state. Open the book to any given weekend, and there are literally dozens of events for consumers to choose from.

But why compete? Think big picture. Maybe there is a way to combine forces with an existing event. Why start a new event when you can expand an existing one? Why not plan complementing activities to increase the number of reasons a visitor would select your event or series of events?

Another great way to work together is by sharing expenses. Most cities are home to more than one festival

each year, and many host more. There are common items that each of these events need: fencing, trash barrels, tents, plastic drink cups, and much more. If festivals would combine their buying power instead of individually purchasing these same items, there would be the potential for great economy of scale and cost savings. What if those plastic drinking cups were purchased in bulk and featured the logos of all participating festivals? Each festival would benefit from a lower cost per unit, and the exposure of the logos would cross-sell each event to new audiences.

As I mentioned earlier, there are a myriad of other considerations in building a new festival or event, but addressing these five key steps will put you much farther down the road of producing the next great Texas festival! ★



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