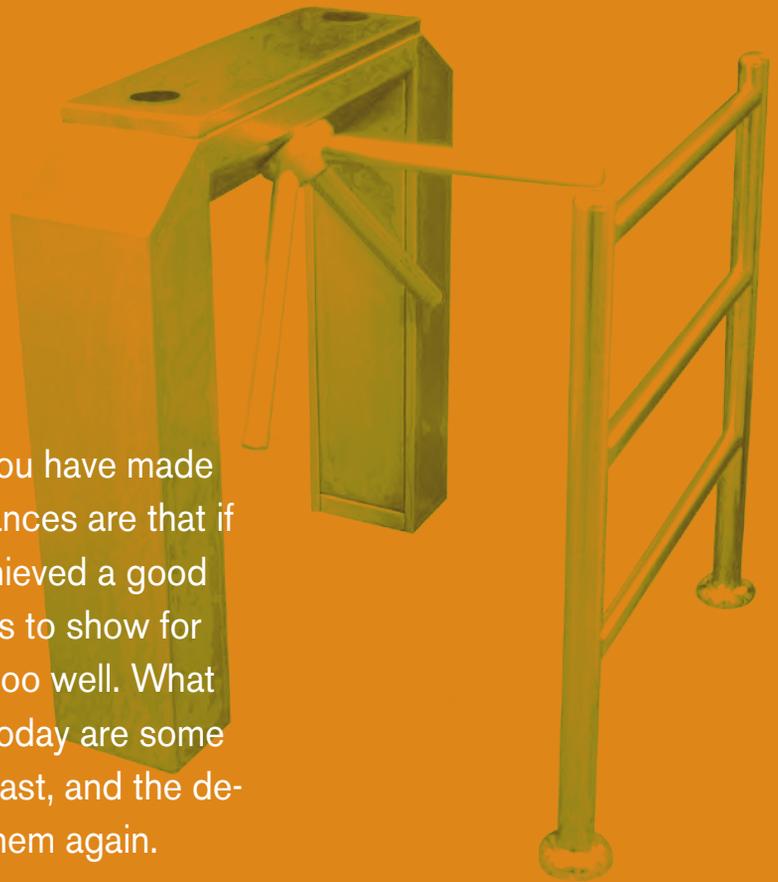


Turnstiles: Marketing for Event Managers

By Sean King

Turnstiles: Five Fabulous Failures to Learn From

If you've been in events long enough, you have made more than your fair share of errors. Chances are that if you're reading this article, you have achieved a good deal of success, but also have the scars to show for those battle plans that didn't work out too well. What actually makes you the leader you are today are some of the poor choices you made in your past, and the desire to work hard to never experience them again.



No-one willingly enters into a project with the goal of failing, but nevertheless, everyone winds up with cringe-worthy decisions that would discourage or demoralize a lesser person. We, on the other hand, celebrate these semi-catastrophic moments when good intentions go awry and try to use these instances in order to learn, share and teach.

Here are Five Fabulous Failures we have made in the course of our time in marketing, and the lessons we took away from these brushes with disaster. We've changed the names to protect the innocent, but hope you can use our experiences to avoid the same sort of less than stellar outcomes we did.

Failed to Understand the Market

My single biggest failure (to date) came from a colossal blunder believing we could bring an event to an audience that we didn't understand.

We had done this type of event hundreds of times before. We lined up heavy-hitter media along with ground level coverage necessary to deliver the key demographics of the core audience.

Fast forward to show day and an empty box office. Presales were weak, but with an outdoor event, we anticipated a large walk-up. But few folks ever appeared.

The lesson learned from this debacle in the middle of a city of 6 million people was that cultural communication runs deep and it takes a thorough knowledge of the audience to gain support for an event. Media and advertising alone cannot deliver success and most of us simply do not have budgets big enough to create demand. You must understand all facets of how to engage your prospective target online and off, or run the risk of failure.

The flip side of this lesson is a fact that many of organizations struggle with as well: the programming of events must resonate with the community who will make your event a participatory, if not financial, success.

Too many marketing and programming teams spend their time in their comfort zones instead of delivering events the community wants. It is easy to create events that appeal to those who you know and members of an "ideal" audience, but great work can happen when

you serve an underserved audience.

What is the pay-off when targeting the community at-large? I would answer if we can't achieve success by paid attendance or sales receipts, then sponsorship remains a viable revenue stream alternative. And with sponsorship activation comes the opportunity of increased engagement, better overall guest experience and a financial payoff from entities who want to reach your audience.

What better way to make a success out of a failure!

Failed to go "all-in" Commitment

It's an all too common word, but so very difficult to incorporate into all we do. When you go all-in it's a risk. It's a gamble that pushes your personal boundaries, but when works, it pays tremendous dividends.

If there's a failure I've made the most, it is by not going all-in. Not because I don't believe in the cause or my team doesn't know how. But more times than not, reluctance is a result of being tasked with so many priorities that it is difficult

to commit the resources necessary for breakthrough results.

So how do you go all-in market-wise, when most people believe it's best to stay conservative and not get too engaged? After all, there's always a way out when you're not all-in.

The fact is, being totally committed is simple! Find the space where your team feels least comfortable and push them towards it. Make a splash. Run a promotion too crazy to work. Push the boundaries with shocking images or copy. Make a difference. The times where the greatest investments of time, resources and creativity are engaged bring with them the most dynamic outcomes.

Don't make the mistake of allowing the team to fail before they try. If they see an opportunity and decide to take the easy way out, they may find a moderate level of success – but never reaching the highest heights of achievement. Going all-in more times than not will deliver business results which are far beyond your wildest expectations while helping to build morale and bolster the team for the next challenge.

Failed to say “NO”

We marketing folks are natural born optimists. How else could we wake up every day and go to work to fill the never ending buckets with the results necessary to move our organizations and events forward?

But with this glass half full mentality brings the challenge that everything sounds like a good idea. I've never met a successful marketer who didn't believe any project just needs the right amount of attention, proper messaging and efficient use of media to become successful.

But experience tells us that is not exactly true.

If your organization is like most, there is a limited pipeline to distribute your messaging. When you already have core programming and promotions ongoing, there's very little room to add any more messaging of value. In the end, you begin to pull attention away from the very important – and replacing it with tangentially important and in turn, everything suffers.

Sometimes marketing folks need to say “no.” Other times it takes senior management to say no to the marketing's latest and greatest ideas. Together, saying “no” can advance the cause, even though it seems to be counter-intuitive at the time.

With ambition comes responsibility. The responsibility is to not try and do everything, but rather to focus your energies on doing a few things extremely well. Your guests, your fans and your team will applaud you for it.

With this strategy, your brand will continue to grow and strengthen, and in the long run be able to provide you with the necessary resources to accomplish your most aggressive objectives.

Say “no” and you'll be surprised how many “yes's” start to come your way.

Failed to Work with Urgency

Failing to work with a sense of urgency is an epidemic. If you're not working every day with a clock ticking in the back of your head, then you are most likely waiting for things to happen for you, rather than making them happen on your own terms.

You are not alone, as sleepwalking through projects is something all shops, from the largest to the smallest, have to fight. The results manifest themselves in projects failing to reach their full potential, haphazard or weak execution and usually a rush to finish a task or set of tasks at the last possible moment.

Working without a sense of urgency, can also be mistaken for another malady: waiting for perfect conditions to occur before work can begin. This scenario is commonplace in many organizations because it allows for rationalization of the number one workplace danger, which is procrastination.

When you work with a sense of urgency, there is a desire to accomplish the current task and move on to the next as quickly as possible. Progress is not just a result of productivity, but it is a way to measure the desire and creativity and drive of the staff.

When you wait, a little piece of the project dies a little. Opportunities missed. Connections lost. In events, many times the delays mount due to items and issues out of our control, but a wasted day or week or month, makes it that much harder to ever realize what the true potential of the idea was to be.

And for that, we should be a little sad. Lost opportunity to achieve greatness may be the greatest failure of all.

Failed to Understand the Politics

The grandest of ideas, the ones that have the power and potential to change the world, rarely see the light of day.

This isn't due to a lack of passion or indifference by the parties involved. Rarely, these failures have little to do with the active and aggressive work against an idea or concept. But rather, the failure of these ideas to gain traction and build the momentum necessary to come to fruition, is due to a lack of knowledge of all of the politics at work.

Strategic marketing partnerships of the most noble of causes grind to a halt

because one party or the other begins thinking about all of the reasons why not to, or “what happens if,” rather than collaboratively working together on solutions for a better future.

One of the biggest failures of my career, as measured by the scale of the impact which could've been realized, was a byproduct of failed negotiations due to the politics and the agendas of the leaders and organizations involved.

Sure, evaluating all possible outcomes for the purpose of due diligence and risk aversion is necessary, especially when the project is large in scope. But understanding the politics of what drives the individuals and organizations before they reach the table is a great way to pre-determine the outcome and eliminate one barrier toward success.

One always wonders what may have been of ideas that had great promise, but due to conditions and relationships beyond our control doomed the project from the very beginning.

While these Five Fabulous Failures create the most prolific portions of my treasured Failure Portfolio, there are many, many more where these come from. These five are only a sample of the obstacles and experiences I've encountered along the way and I thank you for the opportunity to share them. Hopefully, you'll be able to avoid some of the same errors I've made, and if I save only one project from wasted energy or poor outcome, than I consider my work complete!

Every day I rise to see what new challenge is before me and what failure I can learn from in the day ahead. I encourage you to make a few mistakes, test new ideas and learn from them. Along the way, please consider sharing your favorite failures with me at www.artsmarketingblog.com or [@sking.aspire](https://twitter.com/sking.aspire). Together, I hope we can help each other and the next generation of event marketers to overcome the challenges facing them and keep the Turnstiles spinning!

Sean King has been consulting with small businesses and non-profits organizations for over 20 years. Currently, Sean is the Director of Marketing & Communications for Youth Education in the Arts (YEA!), a non-profit organization based in Allentown, PA which teaches life lessons through music. He also blogs regularly at www.artsmarketingblog.org. You can follow Sean on Twitter [@skingaspire](https://twitter.com/skingaspire) or contact him at: sking@yea.org