

Three Simple Ideas to Increase Success in Festival and Event Operations

1 Eliminating

2 Planning

3 Flexibility

By Cindy Verge

“What do you do if something goes wrong” is one of my favorite questions ever asked by a reporter. Obviously this person had never been involved in producing an event or a festival. (My answer was: that is “WHEN something goes wrong.”)

It is a dream of mine to one day to truly say nothing went wrong or perhaps everything went according to plan, but so far that hasn't happened! After 14 years in the industry, I have developed some working guidelines that greatly reduce the possibility of things going wrong.

For me, I see three keys to dealing with the everyday management of festivals and events: eliminating, planning and flexibility. They can also be a starting point for dealing with truly major catastrophes, which fortunately occur less often for all of us.

Eliminating

Eliminating involves pre-planning, double checking and taking care of absolutely everything possible before the start of the event or festival. Good planning allows you to lay the groundwork for your festival, much like a foundation. It is much easier to keep building on a solid start than to try and prop up something poorly executed. It also builds in time to adjust when the unexpected arises.

Checklists and timelines help to identify and schedule tasks, ELIMINATING surprises as much as possible, so nothing gets missed as the event date approaches. Be sure to break down checklists and timelines from the overall festival timeline to those needed for individual events. Large events may also need to be broken down to several individual timelines, depending on the complexity. There are data base programs and spreadsheets that can help if the details are overwhelming, but something simple can also work well.

The first step for a timeline is to start with the event date and work backwards. Decide when you need items – supplies, t-shirt designs, artist contracts, lighting contracts, original art, board decisions – in order to have everything ready in time for the event/festival. For instance, we commission a different piece of art each year and use the piece as our poster, on

our brochure and on official merchandise each year. In order to meet all the production and event deadlines, we choose our artists 18 months ahead of the festival that will feature their artwork.

Once the timeline is in place, develop checklists for the individual aspects of the festival, event or task. The timeline I use for our Key Bank Tulip Ambassador Event is a good example. It takes place in early February, but work on it begins much earlier.

In this case, information needs to get to fourth and fifth grade classrooms in January after Christmas break (and in this case because of the holiday, earlier isn't better). We start work on this aspect of the event in December which allows us to determine individual school and district requirements. If all of this was left until January, a small staff augmented by volunteers couldn't get the information out in a timely manner. By developing a timeline and breaking the event down into individual tasks that are completed as early as possible, needless stress is ELIMINATED and time exists if something unforeseen develops.

As you can see, the event timeline puts contacting the various districts in our area in December, along with updating the information to be sent out. This particular event timeline has changed as every event timeline should not become a static – each particular timeline should be reviewed at its conclusion to determine if anything needs to change.

Once you are confident you have an adequate timeline, the next step is to develop

TASK	ASSIGNED	DEADLINE	COMPLETED
Sign Cascade Mall Contract	Cindy	November	
Confirm Children's Museum part.	Cindy	November	
Meet with Sponsor to Secure Giveaways	Cindy	December	
Materials for schools	Volunteer Bev Volunteer Bev	December December	
• Call school district offices to confirm delivery method (use checklist)			
• Determine number of classrooms needing copies (call individual schools per district instruction)	Volunteer Joan Volunteer Joan	December December	
• Get originals and make needed Copies		December/January	
• Process copies for individual schools and sort by district	Cindy/David	December/January	
Revise Invites/Proof	Cindy/David	December	
Revise Programs/Proof	David	December	
Contact Oasys for Program copying	Betsy	December	
Order Ambassador Badges/Pick up	Cindy	December	
Contact Governor's office for visit date	David/Betsy	January	
Deliver program info to schools (see school checklist)	Cindy/Betsy	January	
Request/pick up jewelry from Warren Jewelers	Betsy	January	
Check with district offices to make sure info is disseminated (see checklist)	Cindy	January	
Verify Children's Museum is on-board	Cindy	January	
Verify Cascade Mall Info	Cindy Betsy/Volunteer Cindy	January January January	
Schedule Classroom visits around Skagit County	Cindy/David	January	
• Giveaways in hand and counted			
• Contact Amb. Schools as needed	Cindy/Betsy	January	
• Visit Classrooms			
Contact 2012 Amb. To verify appearance schedule	Board Rep Sponsor Sponsor/Betsy	January January January	
Schedule/Confirm Volunteers			
• Judges (BOD members)			
• MC			
• Helpers			
Publicity	Cindy/David David David/Cindy David	January/February January January/February January	
• Press Release (2)			
• Sponsor locations			
• Website/Facebook			
• Schedule Post Event Radio Appearance	Cindy	January	
Schedule Balloon Decor	Board Rep	January	
Book with florist for making bouquets	Betsy Cindy/David	January/February January/February	
Process Applications			
• Certificates			
• Paper			
• Names/Schools/Proof	Betsy/Cindy Betsy/Cindy Betsy/Cindy	January/February January/February January/February	
• Input Names/Proof Names			
Letters to Students/Parents	David/Betsy/Vols	January	
Invitations to Event	Cindy/David	January	
Mail Invitations			
Confirm sponsor participants	Board Rep/Cindy Volunteer	January January	
Prepare questions for event			
• Decide on questions			
• Copy, cut and put in container	David	January	
Identify and confirm photographer			

Click on graphic to see full pdf of example.

a checklist. The checklist shows more details and allows someone at a glance to see if all is progressing according to schedule.

Checklists and timelines won't work if everything is left for one person to do – delegate! Assign specific jobs on the checklist and follow up to make sure they are completed. Remember to be flexible and focus on the end result. Evaluate whether the task is completed correctly, as opposed to is it completed exactly the way you would have done it.

This kind of detailed task tracking allows staff and volunteers to get all the small things done that make up a festival without feeling overwhelmed. It also prevents information residing with just one person – ELIMINATING the stress of what to do if the festival director is in the hospital with pneumonia, has a family emergency, etc.

Planning

Planning goes beyond the timelines and checklists. It should involve the overall operation of your festival or event, including staffing, traffic control, crowd control, and major factors (weather for instance) that festival organizers cannot control.

Planning should involve spending time thinking “what if.” Every festival has “what ifs” that happen, some big and some little. By at least thinking about possibilities, contingencies can be prepared and ready to go. This thinking can be big – preparing for the catastrophic terrorist attack – but for most of us, it again involves the little things. Planning also involves thinking ahead for the future, which can be as simple as what to do for the 25th anniversary of your festival or as complex as planning for funding changes in traffic control/flow.

“What if” planning should include your volunteers. Treat volunteers much like employees – use applications, get emergency phone contacts, and provide job descriptions and acceptable conduct guidelines for them. Take the time to train your volunteers for the job they are doing. Answer the question “What if our volunteers were like employees?” Your festival relies on its volunteers to handle a myriad of jobs; make every effort to have them prepared for the tasks. This can be done in groups, by assigning lead volunteers to mentor and train new recruits, or by one-on-one training by festival staff. Volunteers are the best cheerleaders for your festival AND, when empowered, do amazing work.

Also remember that your volunteers either are retired from day jobs or have day jobs. Utilize that expertise in your planning. Listen for suggestions and be open for new ideas.

Weather is a big “what if” for many festivals and events. The Skagit Valley Tulip Festival is no exception. Our star attrac-

tion (100's of acres of blooming tulips) loves cool temperatures and rain, which makes it rather difficult for the people coming to enjoy the flowers. We schedule the festival for 30 days with “bloom dates according to Mother Nature.”

You can't plan the weather, but you can know what the weather is likely to do – hot, cold, wet, etc. – and help your visitors prepare. Keep emphasizing what people need to be ready for. Get that information out in your printed and digital material. Think through (and write down) what the festival staff and event organizers will do in an emergency situation – what if the river floods during your festival, if it is too cold for toads to come out, if the ice isn't thick enough for races – plan for the what if and know who will answer questions, how to help visitors already on-site and those in transit, and how to decide to cancel or keep going.

Use your Social Media sites, your festival website, and electronic newsletters in the months preceding and during your festival to get current and up-to-date information (weather, a cancelled appearance, etc.) out to your festival fans. Make sure the messages match and have someone available to monitor, answer questions and update as needed. Also notify conventional media as appropriate, depending on the information you need to get out.

Flexibility

Once you have eliminated as many variables as possible and have planned for as many aspects as possible, spend some time anticipating what will happen. Know that things will happen that aren't according to plan and be ready with a flexible plan of action. Sometimes the plans are small, sometimes large, but it is always easier to have responses ready rather than reacting.

For instance, using social media and website postings to give sponsors an extra round of publicity is a great idea and is something that festivals and events should utilize. But, anticipate, that as you highlight different sponsors, you will get a call asking “why wasn't I there?” Allow the flexibility in your publicity schedule to incorporate a sponsor's concerns and tweak your plans accordingly. And, of course, when doing this sort of publicity, make sure you have the information at hand to tell sponsors either the date they've been highlighted or the date they are scheduled to appear.

Weather questions are always good exercises in flexibility. They are also usually painfully obvious, so be flexible in your response, decide what you want to communicate, and continue to get your message across regardless how many versions of the question you receive. Members of the news media will want to know how the rain,

snow, etc. will affect your festival. You don't want to be caught on a live camera shot or live radio without an answer. Know, for instance, what you will say when someone asks: “Did the snow harm the tulips?” Yes, that was a real question . . . it didn't kill the tulips, it didn't harm them really, but we opted not to publish any pictures as it wasn't the image we wanted to convey. By the time the festival opened for the day, most of the snow was gone and it was sunny and cold! Most of all, while you are busy being flexible, smile!

Flexibility works best in conjunction with good knowledge and preparation. Being prepared allows you to travel to a network studio to do a live on-air interview or to take a VIP on a personal tour. Being surprised is good when it's a birthday party, but not when you are running a festival or event.

Remember that things not going according to plan can be positive as well. Look for opportunities and adapt your event or festival to include the new element. Sometimes the change can be small – say a donation of potted plants for your volunteer thank you banquet – or much bigger, like a person coming in and wanting to become a festival sponsor at a major level after all the pre-planned spots are filled. Naturally in both cases, you are flexible and incorporate the new elements.

Flexibility allows festivals to embrace their audience and communities and try new things. It involves a lot of listening and being willing to try new ideas. If you start an event planning meeting with “this is the way we've always...” it is just another way of saying “we don't want to change.”

Change and unpredictability will always be a part of the festivals and events industry. Dealing with those elements is vital to the success of individual festivals and events. The ideas outlined here have been developed through trial and error over the past 10 years of managing the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival. These techniques have worked to eliminate variables and accomplish tasks, allowed the use of advance planning to identify and quell potential problems, and provided a flexible response to festival management.

Cindy Verge – As with many of us in the Festivals and Events industry, I came to be an Executive Director after first working elsewhere – as a writer, editor, office supervisor, and newspaper reporter in my case. My formal education is from the University of Washington where I earned a BA in Communications. I have two daughters (21 and 24) and am happily married to my husband, Tom, for 31 years and counting.