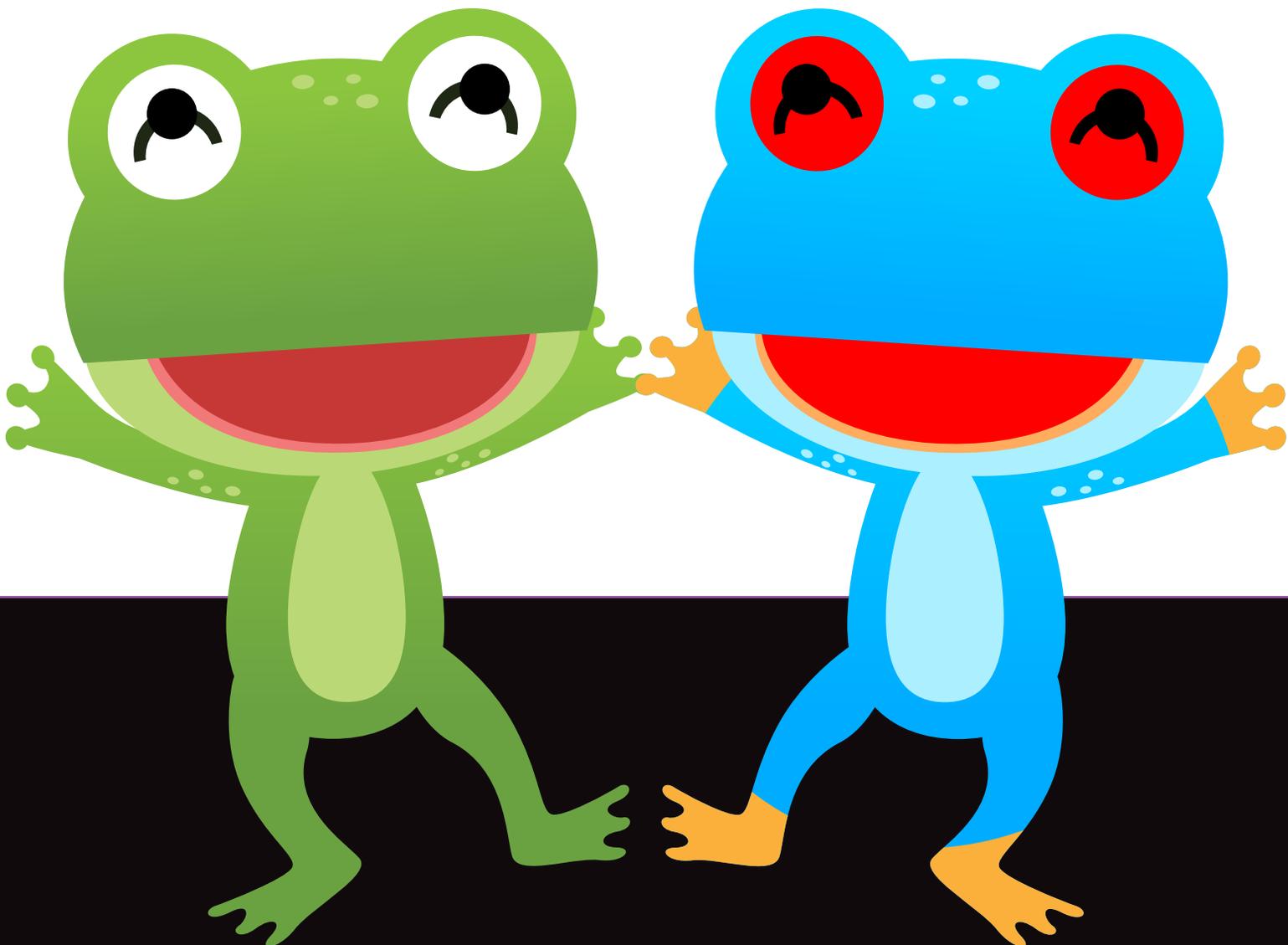


FROM GREEN TO COLORFUL!

How to Earn Your Stripes in Event Planning

By Niki Frank



Part 1 – Green

Kermit the Frog knew what he was talking about when he said, "It's not easy being green." The term "being green" is often associated with a professional lacking experience in their given field. Your client/company wants to know when they walk through your door that you are competent, responsive, well connected and in many cases aggressive about meeting their needs. This is especially true when it comes to beginning a career as an Event Professional. No Kermit, that is not easy but, as I have learned throughout my journey as a young Event Professional, having passion is a wonderful place to start and serves as the key to navigating your way through the beginnings of a meaningful career.

Are you in the green category? Great, this is an exciting time! You may be 22 and fresh out of college, or 50 with a new found passion and looking to set out on your own business adventure. Wherever you may be, own it. One of the most powerful tools we have as event professionals is our ability to make impactful decisions with confidence. Being honest about being new to something, even if you have already been successful for years is liberating and can allow you to stay humble through the learning process.

Do you remember when you realized you wanted to become an event professional? Were you at your favorite music festival? Or perhaps you were watching the Olympic ceremonies and thinking, I could do that! Although we wish we could jump right in and make all those Olympic rings open, we have to start from the ground up with our hands in the mud, sometimes quite literally.

An important aspect of starting in event planning, as in many careers, is finding a focus. There are a wide variety of jobs in events out there and some of them take different passions and training. Are you someone who likes seeing people join together for a cause? Non-profit event planning could be perfect for you! Do you enjoy fabric selections? Wedding planning is where you may look first. If you do not know where you are headed, that is okay however, just start somewhere. Doing any event position while knowing you are searching may help you find your skills and passions, which will help you pick a focus.

Here are some concentration options:

- Corporate/Meeting
- Community/Festival
- Wedding
- Diplomatic
- Non-profit/Fundraiser
- Athletic

If you are fortunate to know your focus at this stage, you are one of the lucky ones. There are many more fields and specialties in event planning, but categories such as these can help you start focusing your short and long term professional goals.

Once you have settled on a focus, let's move onto the blood, sweat and tears. Let's get Red!

Part 2 - Red

Dragging sandbags in the freezing rain...duct tape sticking to your shoe...zip ties breaking your fingernails...creating your first ROI report; here is where we separate the party planners from the professionals. After you find your concentration, it is time to start gaining some experience and possibly taking a couple of classes.

First, look up your dream job online. What kind of skills and knowledge does it require? Find 4-5 jobs that sound desirable to you. Do they have any common skills or requirements? Find ways to build those skills. Do they require education? It could be time to go earn that baccalaureate degree. You may need to spend time training on Microsoft Excel (which you will never stop learning!). If you are interested in entertainment event planning, this may be the time for trade education in something like music business.

If you see that earning a degree or certificate is a must, then go for it! As you are studying, it is important to make the most of your time in school. This means volunteering or working part time with events. If you can get a part-time position planning, fantastic! If you can volunteer to stuff Easter Eggs with candy, do it. In this world, experience speaks volumes. Targeting your efforts toward a specific field can be beneficial, but many companies are looking for individuals who bring a wide array of experiences, understanding that they will have an expanded knowledge base and likely bring innovative ideas from other disciplines. Your college career is a perfect time to build this experience. Volunteer to run a fundraiser for a college group. If you work in a non-events job, like a fast food restaurant, ask them if you can plan a small promo-

tional event for them. Remember to keep a record of any type of event you work on, these will be perfect resume builders.

Here are some tips on how you can gain practice during your education:

- Help organize a local 5K for a non-profit of your choice.
- Assist or join a student organization on campus. They routinely plan events.
- Check your local convention center and see what large conventions are coming to your area. These are often well organized and widely attended events that can allow you a variety of opportunities in a short time.
- Create and hold an event for all the students in one of your classes.

During this time your chosen focus will either be refined or it will transform. Volunteering for different types of events will allow you to rest easy following your chosen path. For instance, perhaps you thought that athletic event planning was something your heart was set on, but you volunteer for an opening night celebration and find out you actually do not enjoy the zealous fans. This is a great time to refine your path. Maybe you would enjoy professional planning for golf tournaments instead.

Part 3 - Blue

After you have given plenty of sweat and Saturday's, it is time to find the first true job for you! This opportunity can come anytime but after you have completed your education or obtained experience in events is when most find it ideal to start searching for a full time position. Hopefully during your volunteer or part time work period you have built up quite a few projects that you have worked on. This will significantly help your chances of landing your initial job by standing out! It may even be that during your volunteer work you made connections with a group of professionals that are willing to give you a shot at a full time position. If you work well while not getting paid it is a testament to how well you will work if they paid you!

Once you start applying for a full time position, find some companies you would want to work for. Find their HR managers name and contact information.

An important aspect of starting in event planning, as in many careers, is finding a focus. There are a wide variety of jobs in events out there and some of them take different passions and training.

Another great thing to remember while you are in the thick of building of your professional career is to remember that the Event Industry is consistently evolving. Although you may work your way up to a manager or director position during this time, remember that being present and willing to go back into the trenches with your employees is important.

Reach out to them with your resume and let them know, "I'm not just looking for a job, I'm looking to work for your company." A position may not be readily available but seeing your determination and affection for their company, they may keep you in mind when a position becomes available.

Most event professional positions require creative thinking. Show the employer that not only are you qualified and ready for this position, but you can add something unique to their company because of your fresh perspectives.

Tips on landing an interview in the event industry:

- Customize your resume to what the company is looking for
 - Example:
 - If the job description says they are seeking a detail orientated person make sure that each job on your resume explains comprehensively how you used details to make specific jobs a success. Also, nothing sends the message more clearly that you are not detail oriented if your resume includes spelling errors.
- Stand out during the application process
 - Examples:
 - Corporate Meeting Company - Make a list of some unique ways that their company could stand out to clients during meetings.
 - Tradeshow Employer - Create a resume that looks like a tradeshow brochure that walks them through your work history
 - City Government - Design a new activity that could be utilized at their most popular event.
 - Large Music Festival - Put together a video introducing yourself with some of the music from past performers on the video.

This by no means is an exhaustive list. This is to get you thinking about what is different for landing a job in the event industry. Show them you can get the job done from the start.

Part 4 – Gold

You are getting paid to plan. Now that is exciting! Once you have landed this initial position, it is time to put your history to work. Work well, work efficient, and never settle for, "That is how we have always done it." Traditions have their place in all professions, however the event industry is continually being tested with each passing year. Innovation and Events go hand in hand.

Innovation does not only apply to events, it applies to your career as well. During this time of paid experience, you should be continuing to build on your already impressive resume. This means building relationships, continuing to learn new skills, and setting high goals for yourself.

Tips to growing your Event Professional resume:

- Time - "build" years send the message to organizations that you are loyal, and are not looking to jump ship at the earliest opportunity.
- Network locally - professionals that could later be a reference. Networking is more than exchanging cards; build opportunities to partner with these new contacts that mutually benefit your organizations.
- Subscribe to specialty event magazines - ie: (the one on your screen), Special Events Magazine, etc.
- Become an IFEA member and attend an IFEA conference
- Obtain your CFEE - certification through IFEA
- Join local Event Organizations (MPI, SFEA, ISES, etc.)
- Continue to volunteer
- Learn new technology software and seek applicable certifications.

Another great thing to remember while you are in the thick of building of your professional career is to remember that the Event Industry is consistently evolving. Although you may work your way up to a manager or director position during this time, remember that being

present and willing to go back into the trenches with your employees is important. This not only allows you to stay fresh and on top of current trends in the market, but you can grow your reputation as a leader and inspire good morale and a sense of camaraderie within your team. Remember you were green once! How would it have helped you for the boss to come alongside as a colleague from time-to-time instead of managing remotely?

Part 5 – Colorful!

Congrats you have earned your stripes! Well, some of them at least. You have put in the blood, sweat, and tears. You have dried brides eyes, chased streakers out of your festival, and built a reputation for yourself. Not unlike any other industry professional, this is a wonderful time to give back to the community that has fostered your profession. It is time to spread the love and knowledge you have built up over all of those years.

Tips on giving back:

- Speak at an event conference on your expertise/experience
- Write articles for publication that provide insights on your learnings
- Start your own company and hire quality event planners
- Hire interns - remember what it was like being green!

Find new members of the Event

Planning community, and mentor them. Start within your own company and train the next generation to replace you so that you have the opportunity to branch out if you see fit.

So Kermit, does this sound like you have a long road ahead? That is okay. Enjoy the journey. You have chosen an exciting path. But in the end, seeing the faces of those who are enjoying the fruits of your labor, make it all worth it. One day, it is almost certain, you will contribute to the biggest day of someone's life. Savor it.

Niki Frank earned her stripes by receiving her Bachelor's Degree from The Ohio State University and serving almost 5 years in city government. She is currently a Senior Event Operations Coordinator for Healthways the largest independent global provider of well-being solutions which is headquartered in Franklin, TN. She plans to receive her CFEE Certification at the Annual IFEA Conference in 2014. She can be reached at niki.frank@healthways.com or 615-614-4285.