

Turnstiles: Marketing for Event Managers



By Sean King

It's a Monday morning, roughly three months since your last event, and your boss comes to you and says, "The Board meeting over the weekend went extremely well. So well, that we've decided we're going to add another event to our schedule and you have six weeks to launch. Go!"

What do you do?

- A. You immediately stand up and walk out.
- B. You begin to sweat, giggle nervously as your eyes roll back into your head as you slowly lose consciousness.
- C. You reach to your laptop, open a file and calmly begin building the marketing plan from the same format you've crafted and refined after years of experience.

You say you don't have a copy of a marketing plan? Well, then A and B might be your best alternatives. But if you are simply determined to succeed, this article is for you. We'll give you some quick tips and helpful hints on how to build a marketing

plan that will at the very least, get everyone singing from the same songbook.

Step 1 – The Big Picture

All plans should begin with the overall objective of the organization and how the project fits within that mission. Why are you doing this in the first place? Most plans fail because everyone does not know the simplest questions: "What are we doing and what are we trying to accomplish?"

Side note: You should incorporate the basic mission of the organization and the significant brand traits in your summary to reinforce the integration of all elements into the project. Too often mission statements become relegated to signage and website afterthoughts, here is the chance to have it live and breathe as part of your working document.

Step 2 – The Scope

The Scope stage is the first time that you roll up your sleeves and dump all of the items you anticipate to be part of

the overall project into a comprehensive overview. The Scope is where you create project definition, outline the multiple steps of the plan, but at this point you're not quite ready to dive into the weeds.

Side note: Speaking in future tense is a good way to get folk's heads nodding and agreeing to what the eventual outcome will be for the project. This step in the planning document is usually the toughest because it's the piece that aggregates all of the conversations, meetings, and brainstorming into one document. You may find it particularly helpful to write this piece, sleep on it for a day or two, and then come back to update it.

Step 3 – Projected Budget

If it makes money, it costs money. The budget stage is where you put pen to paper (or open the Excel) and dig in with the numbers to provide successful execution of your plan. Make sure to not leave anything off the budget, including those large expenses like media buys, printing, postage, etc., but also the smaller items like signage, graphic design and tchotchkes.

Side Note: One point that is argued in many organizations is personnel costs. If your team is set up to expense out particular individuals to a project, then by all means go for it. But in most cases, the majority of the organizations are small enough to not have to add this level of detail.

Step 4 – ABC's (Assumptions, Barriers and Constraints)

If you learn and understand your ABC's, it goes a long way for you to avoid the pitfalls outside the realm of marketing that can affect your project. While they are not necessarily marketing's problems to solve, they do impact the job we are left to accomplish.

First, you need to list all of the Assumptions related to the project. These are all of the big picture pieces that you, your team and organization understand as being fact. The fact that your venue will be available, any third party vendors or acts will work with you on the event, the weather will be cooperative for an outdoor event, etc., are all Assumptions to include in your planning document.

Barriers are those challenges that can be overcome with a little creativity, negotiation or flat-out chutzpah. Most event organizers have become very adept at taking on these obstacles and succeeding.

Constraints are the third component to this step. These are the challenges that cannot be overcome. Listed under this category would be physical or logistical limitations that cannot be changed, external competitive forces from other events and promoters, staff and resource availability, etc.

Side Note: The senior event staff can answer most of these questions in one meeting or document. If you work on a small team, it might take a few folks to put their heads together to create a comprehensive list. Don't worry about creating an exhaustive list of ABC's, but rather, focus on those major elements that will directly impact your efforts to market and promote your event.

Step 5 – Roles & Responsibilities

Without a doubt, accountability is a critical element in the execution of any marketing plan. Far too many times, great plans never reach their full potential because the roles and responsibilities are not clearly outlined for each of the stakeholders in the project. In the worst case scenario, marketing team members do not have proper direction or understanding of what they are to accomplish.

This step of the project plan is important because you are able to assign tasks to individuals and teams to complete. Just as in any playbook, if you direct people to what has to be done and provide the resources and direction for them to accomplish their goals, success will follow.

The assumption here is that the actual communication and promotion plan has been thoroughly vetted and that the steps needed to succeed are in place. If the proper amount of time was not spent on planning the plan, all of the effort and expense will go for naught.

Side Note: Make sure all team members are included in this stage. Marketing committee members, volunteers and others who lend a hand in promoting the event, need to know what role they play and how best they can serve the overall plan.

Step 6 – Milestones

The Milestone stage is the part of the document where you set your objectives to be met on the way to achieving your overall goal. If you have set up the plan, agreed on the budget and assigned roles, the final piece of this puzzle is the check-ins to make sure you are staying on task.

Milestones should measure internal and external items such as going live with ticket sales, holding a press conference or announcing a new sponsor. Milestones can also be your guidepost for when you want to measure the number of tickets to be sold, number of social media impressions to be reached or similar metrics.

Side Note: As any time management or motivational expert will tell you, without stated goals that are measurable and in time, most projects are doomed to not reach their full potential. Setting and reaching Milestones for your project

could be the single most important element to a successful plan.

Step 7 – Communications & Promotion Plan

Finally, it's time for you to get into the weeds with a comprehensive Communications & Promotion Plan. This is the step when the actual plays in the play-book are written.

As part of this step, the timetable for social media posts are listed, dates and action plans for press releases and publicity are detailed, the activation of the paid and in-kind advertising buys are aligned, engagement plans for your sponsors are outlined among the myriad details that go into even the smallest marketing plan.

What is so very important at this stage is the vetting of ideas. Give an event or project to marketers and you'll run out of bandwidth before they run out of ideas. It is imperative that you separate the great ideas from the average, determine what works within the constraints of the brand and mission of the organization and set sail with your plan. There will always be some good ideas that don't make the cut, but to increase your efficiency and improve the effectiveness of the marketing plan, you need to choose one direction and stay the course.

Side note: Remember that a marketing plan is not solely about advertising and promotion, but rather a compilation of virtually every element of engagement by stakeholders throughout your organization, sponsors, partners and the general public.

Conclusion

While this article is just a brief overview of what a working marketing plan might look like, there are certainly other formats, software solutions and other ways to craft the plan that is just right for you and your event.

In the end, what matters is that you document where it is you want to go, how you want to get there and by when. Stay focused on your goals and there's no limit to the success you will achieve. Best of luck and can't wait to hear about the success of your 2015 event!

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