

PLANNING A BEER TASTING EVENT



By Kelly Zanders



I'm here to talk to you about beer. Just kidding...well, kind of. The Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, is host to one of the finest beer tasting events in the Midwest: Hops & Props. On the first Saturday of March each year, EAA's Aviation Museum is flooded with approximately 90 brewers with over 300 beers to sample, a wide array of delicious hors d'oeuvres and an engaging lineup of live entertainment for 1,500 guests to enjoy. Plus, the event offers a VIP Dinner, which is a five-course food and beer pairing for 220 attendees to indulge in prior to the three-hour general event.

This event continues to grow with both the general event and VIP Dinner selling out. But how do you get your event to this point of success?

Before Hops & Props was born, we conducted extensive market research to ensure we had a solid approach in place. The following article details the steps we took to create this event.

Purpose

Determine your purpose. What is your reason for holding this event? Is it to meet your organization's mission? Is it to bring in revenue? Are you wanting to expose your venue and showcase your exposure to the community? Part of the purpose of Hops & Props is to generate revenue that goes toward other community events we put on throughout the year at little or no cost, but we also thrive on making sure our events are mission-based. With EAA's mission being 'to grow participation in aviation', it may seem unrealistic; however, by utilizing our museum for an event like this, we are able to give our audience a glimpse of the aviation world.

Demographic

Who do you want to invite? The easy target audience for a beer tasting event is anyone 21 and older, but determine if you want to hone in on a particular crowd. Are you hoping to attract college students? Do you want to keep it local? This will help define how you will market your event. For Hops & Props, we market it as an educational tasting in hopes that our guests don't come solely to drink. We price our tickets towards the higher end in order to bring in a more responsible audience.

Competition

Research events at similar venues or similar events at other venues to see how they were executed and what ideas they incorporated. Remember, there is no such thing as stealing in the events world. We borrow. It's important to contact these facilities to inquire about the successes they experienced, the challenges they faced, and if they reached their targeted revenue. Asking them for these details will help you decide if this event is worthwhile. Additionally, you want to research events in your area. Work with your Chamber of Commerce and Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) to get their input. Is there any competition? When is the best time of year to hold the event? How can they help?



Profit and Loss

Create a profit and loss statement by gathering anticipated income and expenses. You may have to provide your best guesstimate on some of your line items the first time around, which is why you should always include overhead, as there are always unexpected costs. Try to be all-encompassing and set a desired profit margin. When your preliminary P&L is complete, make sure you are at least meeting that goal. Don't forget to update your P&L following your event to input the actuals and plan accordingly for next year.

If you are feeling comfortable with your research and the information you put together, let the planning begin! Start with the basics: Date and time, which should be determined when researching your competition. Then decide where you want to hold your event. Do you want to keep it confined to one space or do you want to spread it throughout multiple venues?

With Hops & Props, we have the brewers, food stations and musicians setup in different areas of the museum, and our VIP Dinner in a separate room in order to set an intimate atmosphere for our guests. When confirming your locations, you must then determine your anticipated attendance. At EAA, we work with the Fire Marshal, who sets the fire code for each event space, which determines our maximum capacity for attendance. Make sure you follow the facility's policies regarding this to ensure you are not exceeding what the venue can handle.

Now let's get into the specifics. What and who do you need in order to make this event a success?

Marketing

How do you attract guests to your event? For a beer tasting event, you need to have a variety of beers on hand including local microbrews and up-and-coming beers

to the area. You want attendees to leave your event with a new favorite beer. Invite distributors and brewers and specifically request that they bring their popular products as well as something unique for the guests to try. You can then tailor your marketing materials to showcase your exclusive lineup. Promote both online and on print advertisements, branded with a distinctive logo to connect with your audience. Work with local TV and radio stations to line up interviews to help sell the event. If you can provide them some complimentary tickets to give away, it's a win win.

Sponsorship

Be creative when crafting your sponsorship packages. These days, organizations don't just want to be listed as a supporting sponsor with their logo slapped on a few different signs. Create a presentation with unique sponsorship levels and reference your P&L to determine how much to set each level at. Come up with creative names for the packages and put together what you think will grab a potential sponsor's attention. Present your sponsorship opportunities face-to-face, but be flexible and let them know that the packages can be tailored to meet their needs. By doing this, you are letting them know that you truly want to understand what the organization is looking to get out of their marketing dollars.

Partners

In addition to sponsors, it's important to work with partners you have established relationships with and who have a good reputation. For example, we work with a





Master Cicerone, or what I like to call a beer expert. He lets us know what brewers are trending in our market and which may be a good fit for our VIP Dinner. We then match our VIP brewer up with our local VIP caterer, so they can work with us to create a one-of-a-kind educational dinner experience for our guests. If you have an approved caterer list, work with them to gather bids for your dinner and/or hors d'oeuvres. If they know this is your event and you work with them on a number of events throughout the year, your partners will support you because of your history.

Layout

Where you place everything is key to the flow of your event, especially if you are utilizing a space that has existing displays and equipment that cannot be moved. You want to make sure that your guests have plenty of room to maneuver comfortably and that there is reasoning behind where everything is setup. For instance, when you have multiple bands performing, you need to make sure the sound isn't overlapping. It's imperative to space the entertainment out and conduct sound checks months in advance. And you will want to have your brewers laid out in alphabetical order. You will have guests scope out the beer lineup posted on your website prior to the event as they may want to try a particular beer right off the bat, so help guide them where they want to make their first stop.

Audio Visual

Audio visual helps to enhance an event. Not only will you have specific power and electrical needs for your entertainment, but you also want lighting effects that will boost the look and feel of your event. I like to incorporate gobos, which are logos

or images that can be projected onto a floor or wall. We have gobos made for our presenting sponsor and VIP Dinner partners at Hops & Props, and then project them on different walls of the venue. Plus, they are fairly inexpensive and a great way to enrich the guest experience.

IT

If your event requires Wi-Fi, it's important to make sure your connection is working properly prior to the event. At Hops & Props, we implemented a live social media wall. Attendees could post photos and check in at the event using #hopsprops, and then it would be shared on one of the screens in the museum for guests to see. This was an engaging way to connect with our audience.

Décor

Branding is extremely important when deciding on the décor for your event. Try to stick with the colors of your event by implementing them into the table skirts on the brewer booths and guest table linens on the highboys throughout the venue. Same goes for centerpieces. Because this is a beer tasting event, we like to carry the theme into the centerpieces, so we incorporated beer bottles, bunches of wheat, and mason jars into the designs.

Finance

Finance and tickets go hand-in-hand. Determine how you would like to sell tickets. Do you want to sell them at your sponsor and partner outlets? Do you want to sell them online? With Hops & Props, we went with an online ticketing system. This works great because we were able to collect all information entered in by the

guest and attendees were able to have their tickets scanned at the door, which made for a smooth check-in process. We decided to start selling tickets on Black Friday and promoted them as Christmas gifts, which increased advanced ticket sales. You can even show your members some love by offering them special member pricing. EAA members received \$10 off their general event or VIP ticket. Also, make sure you have petty cash available if you are selling physical tickets at the door.

Merchandise

To generate some extra revenue, think about what you can sell at the event. Be sure to have your basics (i.e. t-shirts), but think of some distinctive ideas that tie into your event. For instance, we sold bottle openers in the shape of an airplane and are looking to sell necklace koozies next year. Think of something your guests will reuse, but will always remember where they purchased it.

Creative Extras

Think outside of the box and create unique add-ons your guests can take advantage of. At Hops & Props, we implemented the People's Choice Awards. Attendees could stop by the awards table to vote for their favorite beer. Once we tallied the ballots close to the end of the event, we presented awards to the top three brewers. Each recipient received a specialty plaque, promotion on our website, and premier booth placement at next year's event.

One last piece of advice: When your event setup is complete and before everyone starts trickling in, take a moment to walk through the event by yourself and really take in everything you and your team just accomplished. This is my favorite part of event day. With all of the chaos pre-event brings and at the pace in which everything comes together, you truly appreciate this time to really let everything soak in. Then take a deep breath, let the doors open, and welcome your guests to an event they will never forget. So raise your glass to being authentic and creating the next great beer tasting event. Cheers!

Kelly Zanders is the Senior Event Coordinator with the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Kelly helps to plan and execute over 200 events year-round in addition to 200 events throughout the week of AirVenture, the world's largest aviation celebration, which takes place in July. She also oversees Hops & Props and AirVenture's Runway 5K.