

By Nick Scala



Event Expansion: EMBRACING THE GROWTH

The old idiom ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ may be applicable in many different scenarios but unfortunately, it isn’t always true in the world of festivals and events. Of course, it would be simple to keep your event identical year after year, especially if you have the perfect blueprint for the event. But communities change and evolve and as event planners we must adapt as our community adapts.

Wait a second, what am I talking about? I’m pretty certain a prerequisite to being an event planner is possessing the ability to predict the future. We must always be one step ahead. Predict the trends and have plentiful amounts of that trend at each event. We all saw Pokémon Go coming and planned accordingly, right?

News flash, this is not reality, however there is one trend that most of us can be certain of: population growth. I work in a town that has seen a 360% population growth over the last 25 years. We went from 9,000 residents to 42,000 residents in a quarter of a century. And as national trends go, we don’t anticipate a downward turn in this growth anytime soon.

What does this mean for events and festivals in our community? As population grows this means our events will grow and may even burst

at the seams if adequate changes and modifications are not made. In this article, I will explain the process of making that transition from small-scale events to larger festivals, while still maintaining the integrity of your event and fulfilling the needs of your community.

In 2000, our community held our holiday tree lighting celebration in a courtyard at town hall. This event lasted 3 hours and about 800 people attended throughout the event. There were arts and crafts, holiday songs and even a visit from Santa. The size and programming suited the community perfectly.

In 2015, this event was held at a shopping center parking lot, attracted +/- 3,000 people over a 2-day period and partnered with an art festival with 150 vendors. And yes, Santa made a visit but this time he came roaring through on top of a fire engine.

So how can this transition be made? There are many moving parts that are spurred into action when an event sees growth like this. A fundamental feature is ensuring that you have the correct facility to host your event.

Small events call for a small event space. Plain and simple, if you have an event that attracts 100 people, you don’t want that shopping center parking lot

because your event will seem empty and poorly attended. However, there’s nothing worse than outgrowing a facility and experiencing complete mayhem as people struggle to move from one activity to another. So when is it time to turn the dial on your facility size?

When making this decision we must first consider the safety of our attendees. You may want to stay at that small facility because it makes your event seem like a rocking good time, but it’s very likely that you’re ready for a bigger and better space. We work very closely with our fire department in our community to ensure that we are not exceeding the total capacity of each facility. Keep an open communication with the Fire Marshall in your area. It’s much better to have a running dialogue than finding out you’re not up to code a day before the event. You may love a certain space for your event but safety and the flow of your event should be of high priority when making this decision.

I’ve learned that there are many tricks and loopholes when making the jump to a larger facility. That first year it can seem empty, if you don’t use your space efficiently. Arrange and organize your event in such a way that maintains the tight knit feel to your event while designating areas for spillover in the

chance that attendance exceeds your expectations. These spillover areas can be as simple as green space for playing horseshoes, ladder golf, corn hole, giant Jenga sets or other self-engaging activities the public can migrate to if need be. Also, consider rerouting your lines towards these spillover areas.

Choose a facility that allows for growth. Each year the event should expand and occupy more of the space. In year one you may have the food court, kid's zone, art show and stage all in the same area (all in compliance with the inspector's code, of course) because it suits the needs of your anticipated attendance and synergy of the event. Year five may require all four of those attractions in four separate corners of your event space. But make sure you pick a facility that allow you to be flexible with the layout. Of course, not all facilities allow for this sort of flexibility. You may be changing sites every 2-3 years, but if possible it's best to keep the event in the same space to allow it to have a true home.

What kind of parking does your facility have? I've found that a lot of facilities are built to host thousands of people, but overall parking spaces may not reflect that. For example, our best facility for hosting events in our community has roughly 500 parking spots. Now this would translate to +/- 1,500-2,000 people (depending on how carpool friendly your community is). The only problem is that our Fourth of July Celebration typically draws +/- 5,000 people. But what makes this facility so special is located right next to a local high school. This means about 1,000 more parking spots that can be obtained through a lease agreement with the school district. Take a long look at your surroundings when deciding on an event space. Parking may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of your event but not having enough parking could be the deciding factor on whether or not the public returns the following year.

So once you have the proper facility locked in, what else needs to be done to guarantee that this transition goes smoothly? During those transitional years it's essential to seek out support and involvement from your community through engagement.

As our Holiday Tree Lighting was making the transition the event coordinator sought out participation from the local elementary and middle school choir departments to perform. So how does this help with overall attendance? Each choir had about 20-30 students, which means 20-30 families tagged along to watch the performance.

With 4 to 5 school's participating you now have created a 100 family guarantee and given these young performers a place to test out their chops. Win-win situation for all parties involved.

Other examples of this active participation can be through public art shows, inviting local bands to perform, t-shirt designing competition and one that I've become very fond of is engaging the community through volunteerism.

When boosting attendance and gaining community buy in it's essential that the public take a certain amount of ownership of the event. What better way to become an integral piece than volunteering at the event? Approach local schools, sport organizations, youth advisory councils, National Junior Honor Society and other local organizations. Not only do volunteers offer a helping hand at the event but they also can be a great resource for advertising your event through word of mouth. Understand that volunteers are not staff and should not be tasked with jobs that are intended for staff. But a duty such as taking an entrance fee or greeting the public is ideal because nothing says "community event" like a member of the community greeting you as you enter.

Community involvement spans beyond active participation and volunteerism. An essential step in this leap of expansion is obtaining an appropriate and suitable sponsor for your event. I would like to stress the "suitable" and "appropriate" part because this plays a large role in maintaining the integrity of your event. You wouldn't ask a fast food restaurant to cater your organization's health and wellness fair just like you wouldn't ask a large national corporation to sponsor your grass roots heritage festival.

An appropriate sponsor can not only boost attendance through the brand of their organization but also through advertisement. Monetary support is always a good thing but it is essential to secure sponsors that are willing to promote the event like it's their own. You may be doing the majority of the planning but if the event is not successful then it reflects negatively on both parties involved. It's important to remind yourself that it is not necessary nor is it beneficial to do all the heavy lifting on your own (literally, but more importantly figuratively). The public will have a much more positive response if they are being made aware of an event from multiple outlets and approaches. Especially if your sponsor is a reputable source that they trust.

So you've upgraded facilities, secured community involvement through active participation and volunteerism and

found that suitable sponsor, now what? Time to rework your marketing scheme. Banners on the side of the road and email notifications may have been adequate for that small 100-person event but won't cut it as you begin expanding.

I'm surprised I've made it this far without mentioning the all-important 's' word: social media. As we've begun expanding our events I've found social media to be a great tool and resource. I know, big surprise. However, it can be a very effective marketing strategy when drumming up anticipation for your event. As the event gets closer begin giving out details of how it will be bigger and better than previous years. We can only say so much on an event flyer and banner but social media allows us to actively engage the community. Maybe you didn't have your headlining musical act secured when you passed out flyers to the community? Social media can make that unfortunate misstep seem like an intentional marketing strategy.

If your event budget allows it, I would highly recommend investing in boosted social media posts. So far, I have not been disappointed by this investment and it's a great way to reach a larger audience and increase attendance.

In-kind sponsorship agreements with local media outlets are also a great way to get the word out especially when working with a small budget. This is a great solution when trying to grow your event when your budget hasn't yet grown. It will allow you to advertise in local newspapers, radio stations and maybe even TV stations in a very cost effective manner.

As you're going through the process of expanding your event it is essential to remain patient and persistent. Just because your community is growing does not guarantee that attendance will grow. Increase in population is a great foundation for event expansion, but you must excite and engage your community. Remember this is their event, not yours.

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