



# WORKING WITH YOUR NEIGHBORS & Creating Community Buy-in Before Hosting An Outdoor Event

By Karlee May

Welcome to the world of festivals and events. We have processes, and timelines, and a way of organizing every little detail like nobody else. If you are familiar with this world of festivals and events, you are aware that everyone wants to end the whole shebang with having had a successful event. We want happy attendees and an unspoken (or better yet, spoken) excitement for the event's return. One sure way to help yourself succeed is to start the whole process with everybody, from the clerk signing your permit to the Saturday Market vendor down the street, as an advocate. Community buy-in can be the most helpful first step to creating a successful event. The business neighbors can be your cheerleaders... but they can also be a nail in the coffin. Getting in the right place BEFORE your event takes place is crucial. Even if your event has been happening for years, its never too late to start. Here's an easy step-by-step process and reasoning behind why creating community buy in and working with your neighbors can make or break your event's success.

My personal and professional experience with this comes from being an

event planner who holds 20+ event days in the heart of the downtown where I live, on the street and in public plazas. This requires significant communication and support from surrounding businesses, as that is a significant impact. In the last two years, 15 of these event days have had a change in the footprint of the event, effecting new businesses and previously effected businesses in a new way. Moving an event goes both ways- if it was the busiest day for the people on the street, letting them know you are moving is just as important as letting the new block of businesses know you are coming. Think through getting quotes of support from community members who appreciate your event, to help in conversations where it is being questioned. Imagine if you were putting on a cycling race, which the course zips by a busy, local favorite coffee shop. If this event felt like it was to negatively impact this business, you don't want the weeks leading up to your event to have unsupportive dialogue inside the coffeeshop. Spending a little time following these steps to insure you have the appropriate community buy in prior can help make or break your event.

## HERE'S WHERE TO START:

### STEP 1: Early Decisions

Once you have a date in mind, and even a loose outline of your event, its time to start. Think, if its early enough to start recruiting sponsors, its time to fill in the people on the footprint. Why? Imagine if your family owned bread business is relying on the timely delivery truck each Saturday morning and your new event footprint closes down their delivery alley. Would you appreciate knowing ahead of time and being reassured by the event organizer that they'll help you figure out a solution BEFORE it becomes a problem? In many cases that very small business owner will have heard through the grapevine that an event is coming and closing down the street, at the "expense of his business." Even though that was never the intent, it's important to make sure those impacted by your event footprint or traffic control plan know upfront what you are doing, when and why you are doing it, and that you care enough about it being a successful day for everyone to spend the time to work through a solution. It can

be as easy as just informing them ahead of time, letting them know to schedule a delivery for early/late, but the little effort goes a mile when it comes to event day.

### STEP 2: The Planning Stages

As you are developing the timing and layout for your outdoor event, think through your location. A successful event in a park or on a downtown/neighborhood street has thoughtful placement of equipment, services and food/beverage – and I don't mean just for the attendees. Think through the logistics and where you are placing all components of the event from the eyes of the people along the street. Example, you wouldn't want your portable bathrooms, although perfectly located for those attending the event, to be along the front of the fine dining restaurant along the street. And you wouldn't want to set up your row of pizza-by-the-slice food trucks in front of a brick and mortar pizza restaurant. Businesses know these components will be at your event, but playing in to the sensitivity of placement will again help you create allies from the neighboring business community. Business owners and operators have a strong voice, so why not have that voice on your side?

### STEP 3: Marketing

Your event details are (mostly) finalized and it is time to start marketing to the public. This is the next point on your radar for working with your neighbors. That's right, its time to circle back with the businesses and residential units around your event location and share with them the marketing materials; the date, timeline, event schedule and poster/graphic associated with the event. With this, encourage them to be involved. Maybe they sponsor? Or, maybe they offer a related food/drink special that day. Maybe they shut down for the day and host an event-related something on your behalf? Maybe they agree to provide water and food for your volunteers throughout the day... and maybe they do nothing. The key here is that you gave them the chance. I have personally experienced festivals creating a specific level of involvement and offering that only to businesses on the footprint of their event. This is another great way to feel inclusive, instead of exclusive. Even if nobody takes you up on it, a good event planner thinks about the nearby community. (Think: there's nothing bad to say if they turned down the opportunities to be involved on their own). Drop off a poster for their shop window, or dedicate a social media post to the tune of checking out the cool, unique shops along Main Street while you wander through the festival. Paying attention to the surrounding community

shows that you are not just taking, but giving back as well. Remember that for your event to be completely successful it can't be detrimental to someone else.

### STEP 4: Event Day!

We know it's busy for you, but guess what? It's probably busy for the businesses on the festival street as well. Send a volunteer or intern around to the businesses, especially those who perhaps didn't have the buy in to the event in the first place, to snap photos of walk-by traffic or in-store busy shoppers/diners. If you had 20,000 people walking by your door in a day, wouldn't you want to know? Realistically you probably cannot stop in and do this yourself, but knowing how the surrounding areas are effected by your event helps you in your future planning as well, so think of this as a win-win.

### STEP 5: The Aftermath

You are done. Your event was a hit. You are exhausted, and you should be. But it's time to prepare a review for your major stakeholders and sponsors, so why not include your business neighbors? If you haven't already put it together, the businesses in and around your event location are also going to want to know if it was successful. This is a wonderful opportunity to slide in the photos you took when they were busy, in relation to your event. Maybe they want to sponsor it next year? Your review can be a simple and not overly detailed, but it's important to take the time to say thank you to the people who helped you out, even just by being there. Because if they were not there, and that street or parklet was abandoned or not a vibrant "place to be", you most likely would not have picked it for your event location either.

These same steps work for the community as well, even if not directly located on your event or festival footprint. Creating early engagement and appropriate communication from start to finish builds more support for you and your event than you can ever imagine. The community and the neighbors to your event can be your biggest advocates for the event returning or being successful in the first place, so harnessing the power of their support is crucial.

There are a couple additional great places you can turn to for generating community support. Any, or all of these combined can be useful organizations to touch base with.

First, if your event is taking place in a downtown or neighborhood business area, look for a Business Improvement District or Downtown Association. (There are many different names for these associations worldwide, but the idea is the same.) These

organizations are in regular contact with the businesses in the area, as well as the community at large, and can be a great resource for information and help in contacting the right people.

Next, look for the neighborhood association in the area of your festival or event. From the standpoint of a supportive organization with contacts to all the residential buildings which may be effected, this is a great organization to connect with. In many cases a neighborhood association will offer to take your information and share it on your behalf, which can expedite the contacting process, but make sure it doesn't feel "passed off".

Another great place to reach out to for information and support are local visitors centers, and convention and visitors bureaus. From the standpoint of engaging with people who might be in town visiting and not aware of your event, they can be great advocates for your event as it relates to travel business.

Lastly, don't forget about the businesses we just talked about. The shops, restaurants and services in and around your festival location can help you spread the word to the community. If they're excited to be a part of something, or supportive of an event in the area, they're going to talk. Their employees are going to talk. The people sitting there, looking at the poster in the window are going to talk. And since they are all talking, seems best to make it the conversation you want them to have. Getting support from the business community is one of the easiest, but often forgotten measures an event planner can take. It is very easy to set these extra efforts to the side as the details of your festival need to take place, and that is completely understandable. But it is important to remember that if you want to leave everyone with a positive experience, potentially increase your revenue and be welcomed back next year, taking the time to get the community buy-in upfront will be paid back in spades.

**Karlee May** is the Events & Programs Manger for the Downtown Boise Association, in beautiful Boise, Idaho, and is working currently to obtain her CFEE. Karlee has worked for the DBA for about 5 years, and has over 20 event days each year. Having deep roots in the business community in her hometown, relationships are the most valuable asset she can advocate for. You can't imagine how much you can get done if you have good people on your side.