

By Maura Haberman, CFEA



STEPS

**TO
GROWING
TOWN
EVENTS**

The richly historic town of Acton, Massachusetts, Incorporated 1735, is located 25 miles outside of Boston with a population of 23,633. Acton has one of the highest tax rates in the state, but on the flip side, excellent nationally recognized schools, and unlike any other town around, a beautiful and pristine park, the Nathaniel Allen Recreation Area (NARA Park). NARA Park has become a regional destination for outdoor entertainment and recreational activities for many in the 495/ MetroWest Boston region, but is known by locals as “the crown jewel of Acton.” Events at NARA can attract an attendance ranging from 200 to 15,000 people from all of New England. NARA will be celebrating its 20th Anniversary in 2019, and the events will focus around this anniversary.

NARA Park is a 40-acre park that includes a unique roofed amphitheater that can lawn seat up to 4,000 people or more if tightly packed, and over 12,000 people throughout NARA itself. The Amphitheater is a large curved bowl that surrounds 30' x 50' stage and is the site for Acton's most special events as well as opportunities for others entities to rent the space for their own events. The possibilities to grow Acton's events are endless and require a professional who specializes in event planning and coordinating. This person is myself, a recent IFEA Certified Festival and Event Executive (CFEE) graduate.

1. The Process

Taking events to the next level is not an easy task by any means. It takes a dedicated, energetic and creative event planner that is savvy at networking, organized, and pays attention to detail. The event planner must be flexible and possess good leadership and business management skills. As well as always being ready to take on the challenge. The event planner must have a sense of direction that is driven by your Mission Statement is very important when you want to take garage band entertainment to national touring performers. Your Mission Statement should be your driving force to your ultimate goal. It will provide you direction and should give insight to your sponsors and partners so they have a better sense of what your ambitions are. For Acton Recreation “Creating a sense of community through quality recreation” is always used when soliciting for sponsorship and advertising events.

Using your creativity, if you have tried Mind Mapping you know it is a great tool that will help you to get those creative juices flowing with a brainstorm of event

ideas! There is never a bad idea when brainstorming, just unrealistic ones. It's amazing how fast you can come up with ideas, even when you are stumped. When you have planned what event you are moving forward with, this is the point where the fun ends and the budget and hard work begins. How are you going to make it work?

2. Partners

Partners are very important when growing your events and you can never have enough. If you are experiencing difficulty finding partners, either become a member or attend a networking event hosted by your local Chamber of Commerce or BNI group. You will instantly find and build relationships with those who want to support your mission statement, especially in a small community. In order to achieve success, you have to network. Acton Recreation has forged many long-lasting relationships through the Chamber that have proved invaluable to our success. The more people you know, the more support you'll get whether it be free advertising, financial or in-kind donors, advice, business support or volunteers. Partners are essential.

3. Sponsorship

This is how most events are paid for, especially if it is not a ticketed event. It is critical to have a sponsorship proposal that will stand out among the many others that your prospective sponsor is receiving. Consider how your proposal looks. Would you read it? Would it capture your attention and pull you in, screaming “I have to be part of this event!” If not, evaluate what you are doing and how you can do it better. Don't waste their time or yours because you may never get a second chance. The proposal needs to first attract the sponsor, or they will just toss it. Proposals should be customized—it shows you took the time to address them personally. You'll want to include color photos with lots of people in the pictures, and typo-free. Bullet lists and charts should be incorporated into the proposal to cut down on looking too wordy. Charts are great to put your demographics into your proposal. In a small town, sponsors are typically the owners of the business and not a marketing director like larger companies. These potential sponsors are persistently sought after for the same dollars you want, from every scout, school and sport group in town. By following these techniques Acton Recreation has experienced sponsorship success and a

95% retention rate. Sponsorship funding has met the goal of paying for all performer's contracts, light and sound production. To maintain a high retention rate, you must follow-through with promises that were made and maintain your relationship year-round. Don't just send a thank you note, remember to send your sponsors a holiday card at the end of the year thanking them once again. Keep the line of communication open. Don't just send the proposal and forget about it, it may take multiple times to get the response you want to hear.

4. Businesses

How do you find them, and get through to the gatekeeper? The trick is networking. Always carry your business card, and prepare your elevator pitch! An elevator pitch can be prepared for different situations for different goals. If you are looking for a sponsorship, vendor, or volunteers, a suggested elevator pitch that could be used to a small business owner “Have you heard about our great events and the potential for direct marketing and outreach which is hard to do these days with internet shopping? We expect to have 500 adults at the event. It would be fantastic if you would be interested in participating. It's a mutually beneficial opportunity – you win, we win and the community wins.” You need to be an advocate for the local businesses. You need their support if you want to increase your scope of events by obtaining their support.

5. Community

In order to make sure you are reaching the whole community, research needs to be done. If you aren't already, using the most recent Census to learn your demographics is highly recommended. Versatility and diversity should be considered when planning your events, activities and food selections. Acton added multiple cultural events beginning in 2010, and these events have grown to attract up to 3,000 people. There is a lot of information included in the Census Report as well as other sources available that include household income and ages of residents. This is important information to know when planning your events and pricing structure for ticketed events. The demographics are good to include in your sponsorship proposal—a sponsor may really want to support your event if the audience is the right fit. Having local groups participate with activities at your events is a win-win. For example, Acton's Winter Carnival included these community groups: Boy

Whether free or ticketed, communication is #1, and the event planner should call a pre-event meeting as soon as possible when event is identified and also right after the event has ended.

Scouts oversight of multiple campfires, the Rotary Club Human Dog Sled Races, or the Acton Minutemen winter encampment and musket volley. These are just a few of the ways to incorporate the community into your events and offer fun activities for all to enjoy, with little to no cost.

There are many volunteers willing to help. Events are fun way to volunteer. If you're lacking volunteers, try working with your local high school's guidance office or other groups such as the Lions Club. When you're a small town, the financial resources are limited and volunteers support is critical.

6. Entertainment

Funding is the number one thing when it comes to entertainment. Who doesn't want an A List Performer? Negotiating has been the best way that Acton has been able to have higher caliber performers each year. Securing the performer begins close to a year in advance, when sponsorship fundraising hasn't even begun. If you have a band that performed and you know you want them back the following year, contact that band sooner rather than later is advisable and start with offering the same terms they just played for. It usually works if done within days of the original performance! You'll want to take good care of your performers and spend that little extra to feed them a catered meal. They feel very welcome and will be eager to return as well as share how you treated them with other like bands. One of the most challenging aspects when moving from small concerts to larger more expensive concerts is when you have an outdoor venue and you have to rely on Mother Nature. In order to avoid a loss resulting from a rain cancellation, a rain-date clause is included in the contract that the performer will be paid, but is required to perform within a calendar year from the original date of performance. Having the rain-date clause has prevented a large loss of money.

7. Logistics

Logistics for any event takes planning, but when you take an event to the next level, there are so many things to consider. Whether free or ticketed, communication is #1, and the event planner should call

a pre-event meeting as soon as possible when event is identified and also right after the event has ended. The event planner should take careful notes and follow-up with any action items and be the center point of communication with the event team. The change going from a small concert on a Thursday evening to a full production ticketed performance is no comparison. If you find yourself moving from small events to larger events, attending the IFEA Annual Conference or the IFEA Event Management School is a must! You will learn the ins and outs of large-scale event planning and management as well as connect with many professionals in your field. Applying what was learned at Event Management School to the Events at NARA Park contributed greatly to its success. There are so many pieces when planning your event such as contracts, scheduling first responders, volunteers, music, activities, securing the perimeter, band amenities/rider, food vendors, beverage sales, handicap access, directional signage, overflow parking, parking attendants, emergency protocol, night lighting, credit card service, money collection area and security, site maps, contact lists, vendor layout map, insurance, risk plan, and so much more. We added additional temporary handicap parking spaces on event nights due to possible higher demand than planned.

8. Advertising

Being a small-town municipality and virtually having no advertising budget, creativity is a must! There are a host of areas where events can be marketed for little to no expense. A street banner is one of the biggest pros when it comes to advertising. You have to remember that it's best to keep the banner simple with just the event, date, time, admission, and location since drivers are moving quickly past it. In addition, pole banners are also placed in high visibility areas and 18 x 24 yard signs are also another good way to advertise. If you check out various social media sites for posting events on calendars, it's amazing how much you can do for free! Acton events are posted on over 15 web calendars. It's helpful to have a volunteer post the events as it can be very time consuming, but well worth it. Other

ways include backpack patrol (school children bring home), flyers on kiosks, bag stuffer flyers, Recreation Program booklet. Other electronic methods that are used for advertising include Facebook, Instagram, and a Constant Contact newsletter. Advertising is pretty impressive and fairly extensive for short dollars!

9. Media

Sending out a press release three weeks in advance was found to be the ideal time. If sent too early, the posting goes out and has been forgotten. Local CableTV is a great resource. In Acton, and like many local cable stations, they are partially funded by the cable companies. ActonTV has created commercials and slides for our upcoming events and features us on a segment called Talk of the Town. CableTV will attend many events and film them. If you have local cable in your town, see what they can do for you!

10. Safety and Security

We have all been impacted since the Boston Marathon bombing. Only 25 miles from Acton, this incident turned the event industry around. We now have more security measures in place and are more vigilant throughout our events. Police have oversight in Acton for our event security, prepare the safety plan, present at all events and are the designated spokesperson. Certificates of Insurance should be obtained prior to your event for all vendors who are participating. Light towers should be in place to illuminate dark areas so guests can get to their cars safely. Radios are given to all staff working the event with direct access to the mobile command center.

In conclusion, it's not an overnight process to go from small town events to advancing to full production concerts, you have to grow your events as well as take the time to educate yourself because this is just the tip of the iceberg.

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