

section

4

Event
creation
and
theming



EVENT CREATION AND THEMING

Topic objectives

After studying this section you should be able to:

- describe the event creation process and its place in the event management cycle
- list the 'five Ws' of event creation, and apply them to the creation of an event concept
- discuss and apply the process of brainstorming to an event
- discuss the 'WOW' factor, or the unique selling proposition (USP) of an event, and its importance to the event product
- discuss the application of an event theme to a variety of elements of an event in order to enhance the event experience
- understand the importance of programming an event's elements in

order to achieve maximum impact on the audience

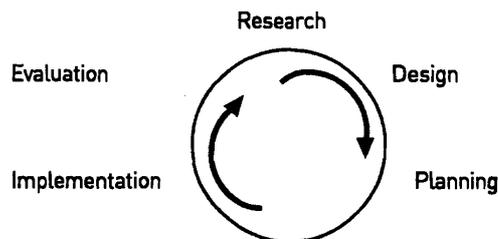
- describe the various roles performed by an event's creative team, and the role of the event manager in forming, leading and motivating this team.

Introduction

Event creation and theming are at the heart of the event management process for both new and existing events. These processes determine the quality of the event experience and the emotional impact that the event has on its audience.

Event creation is a crucial element of the research and design stages of the event management process [see Figure 4.1], when critical decisions must be made about the overall style and content of the event. Successful event creation will result in an event concept that will be a powerful driver of the other components of the event, and of the whole event management process.

Figure 4.1 The event management process



Environmental scanning

Before important decisions on the theme and program of the event are made, it is worth taking some time to analyse the context in which the event will be staged. What are the current social and environmental forces that are likely to have an impact on the event? Are there political considerations that need to be taken into account? What is the state of the economy, and how will this influence people's willingness to purchase tickets or spend money at the event? What themes or trends are current in the marketplace? Are there established interest groups that are likely to connect with the event, and is it likely to gain the attention and support of the media? What is the potential audience

- what types of people from what areas and in what age groups are likely to attend, and how can they be reached? It is important that you have a sound 'feel' for the event context and the market before you embark on the process of developing the event concept.

The 'five Ws' of event creation

Goldblatt (1997) suggests that there are five key questions that should be asked and answered thoroughly as part of the event creation process. These are discussed below.

Why?

What is the purpose of the event? What is it trying to achieve, and what will be the critical measures of its success? The event

may have a number of objectives, e.g. to attract and entertain an audience, to make a modest profit, and to raise awareness of a sponsor's product. The event concept will need to support and satisfy these objectives (see the planning section for a detailed discussion of objective setting for events).

Who?

Who is the target audience for the event? Some events, for example, might attract multiple market segments, e.g. families and young singles/couples. A clear understanding of the target market of the event will assist in tailoring the event concept to the needs and tastes of its audience (see the marketing section for a detailed discussion of audience selection).

When?

When is the ideal time to hold the event? This will involve consideration of what time or season of the year, what day of the week, and what time of the day or night have the best fit with the requirements of the event and the needs of the audience. This will vary according to the exact nature of the event, and to the behaviour patterns and availability of the audience. For example, a family event may best be held on a weekend during the daytime. An event targeting an audience of young singles and couples might best be held on a Friday or Saturday night. An event for seniors might best be held on a weekday morning. Outdoor events will be particularly sensitive to seasonal factors such as weather and available daylight. The timing of all events will need to take into account 'global' factors such as public and school holidays, elections, major sporting events and other events in a similar time frame that may compete for audience attendance and media exposure.

Where?

Where is the best venue or location to stage the event? Choosing the venue for an event will involve both operational and aesthetic considerations. Practical issues will include the cost of venue hire and preparation; the capacity of the venue in relation to the anticipated number of attendees; ease of parking, transport and access; availability of facilities such as staging, power, water, catering and toilets; and the flexibility and cooperativeness of the venue management. However, the choice of venue will also be an important

factor in the creative impact of the event. Ideally, the venue should contribute to the overall ambience and atmosphere of the event. Choosing an attractive venue may add to the appeal of the event, e.g. staging a concert on a riverbank or in a botanical garden. Choosing an unusual venue might add an element of surprise or adventure, e.g. using a venue not usually available to the public such as a factory or a military barracks. Choosing a formal venue might add to the dignity and importance of an occasion, e.g. using a town hall or cathedral to stage an official ceremony.

Selecting a venue will involve balancing all of these factors, and making the best choice in relation to the perceived needs of the event. These issues are discussed further in the section on site selection and layout.

What?

What concept will best achieve the purpose of the event? Deciding on the event concept will determine the program and content of the event, and ultimately the success of the event product in the market place. In determining the event concept, research through libraries, the Internet and the observation of other events will help to start your ideas flowing. A helpful process is to engage in a creative brainstorming session [see figure 4.2] with other colleagues and stakeholders in the event. You should first brief them on the parameters of the event, and then invite them to let their collective imagination soar by devising a range of creative options for the event. The basic rule at this stage of the process is that there are no rules. Any idea, no matter how improbable, outlandish or impractical, should be raised and discussed. As you guide the process, people will often spark off one another, with one idea leading to the next. Sometimes they will reach 'dead ends', and the idea will go no further. At other times, an idea will resonate within the group, and lead to further exciting ideas. Ultimately you must steer the process towards identifying and evaluating those ideas that best serve the needs of the event. Your final choice will be developed and refined to become the event concept. Sometimes this may be resolved in a single session, or it may require several sessions over an extended period. However, it is one of the most enjoyable and productive aspects of event creation, and often proves the old adage that 'two heads are better than one'.

Figure 4.2 The brainstorming process

- Define the parameters of the event.
- Identify event stakeholders and colleagues.
- Brief them on the parameters of the event.
- Brainstorm a wide range of event ideas.
- Identify the ideas that best serve the needs of the event.
- Evaluate and prioritise these ideas.
- Choose and refine an event concept.

Activity 4.1

Experiment with the 'brainstorming' process by gathering together a group of friends (up to eight) from your local community. Explain to them that you would like to gain a measure of experience in the application of the brainstorming process by undertaking an exercise involving the creation of a concept for a festival that would attract a wide cross-section of the local community. Work through the brainstorming process with the group and see if you can generate an event concept via the process.

Activity 4.2

Using an event with which you are familiar, or one about which you can obtain information, critically examine how two of the Ws of event creation have been applied. What changes would you suggest in these two areas based on your analysis? Consider discussing your suggested changes with the event manager to determine the extent to which they are seen as aiding the event in the pursuit of its objectives. For an example of how the five Ws can be applied to an event see the appendix to this section.

Adding the 'WOW' factor to events

Great events are unique, and include that extra special 'something' that distinguishes them and sets them apart. This often attracts media attention, and causes the event to be remembered and admired. This is sometimes called the 'WOW' factor, or the 'unique selling proposition' (USP). It can arise from a distinctive feature of the environment or community. Examples might include a sculpture exhibition along the cliff-tops between Bondi and Bronte Beaches in Sydney, or the March for Reconciliation across the Sydney Harbour Bridge that created a symbolic bridge between cultures. The 'WOW' factor might be a headline artist or guest, such as Nelson Mandela attending a conference in Australia; a technical innovation, such as a youth festival on line on the Internet; the

world's largest omelette – or a cockroach race! The only limit is your imagination – and the ability and resources to deliver the concept. Properly conceived and implemented, USPs have the potential to make an enormous contribution to the impact, profile and success of an event.

Theming the event

Once the event concept has been decided, it should be developed into a theme that shapes and unifies all aspects of the event. The theme will determine the overall look, style, colours, sounds and atmosphere that go to make up the event experience. Typical aspects of an event that the theme might be applied to include:

- Poster(s)
- Entrances

- Brochure(s)
- Staging
- Print, radio, TV ads
- Sets and costumes
- Site decoration
- Compere
- Banners/signage
- Performers

- Staff uniforms
- Catering facilities

The successful theming of the event will create a memorable experience for the event audience, and contribute in no small measure to achieving the objectives of the event.

Activity 4.3

For an event that you are familiar with, or about which you can obtain information, tick the elements below that have the potential to be themed. In the space next to this, make some suggestions as to how you might theme these aspects of the event. Can you add any others to the list?

Name of event:

Event elements suitable for theming:

- | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------|
| Advertising | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Transport | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Entrance | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Site decoration | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Program | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Signage | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Staging | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Compere | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Performers | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Food/catering | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Facilities | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Crowd control | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |
| Staff uniforms | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ |

Other event elements:

Programming

Perhaps the most important aspect of theming is the program. Programming is the art of carefully selecting and arranging the elements of an event so that they create the maximum impact on the audience. These elements will obviously vary according to the nature of the event. They might include music and dance performances, street theatre, arts and crafts activities, games and displays. In creating the program, it is important to consider the flow of performances and activities, so that the interest of the audience is maintained. It will be important also to consider the shape of the program – the rise and fall of intensity and emotion that it evokes in the audience, and the build-up towards a final climax. The traditional formats of the theatre can be a

useful aid in programming, including such devices as the 'transformation scene' of the pantomime, wherein the setting is magically transformed in the final scene. The balloon release and fireworks finale of the modern event are close 'cousins' of this tradition. Used creatively, the program has the potential to take the audience on an experiential journey, and to connect with their emotions to create a memorable event experience.

Managing the creative team

Depending on their scale, most events will require a creative team to develop and implement the event concept. The role of the event manager is to bring the team together, and to guide and support its contribution to the event. This will involve making sure that the team has the right number of members, mix of skills and level

of resources for the task. It will involve leading and motivating the team, so that it strives for and achieves creative excellence. It will also involve good communication, trust and delegation, so that individual team members own the project and give their best to it.

The number and types of roles will depend on the nature, scale and resources of the event. For a small to medium-sized event, the event manager might play a key role in creative decisions, working with a small creative team that might include, for example, a performance coordinator and a stage manager.

For larger events, the event manager might step back to play more of a supportive role in the creative process, and might bring together a larger team to develop and implement the event concept. Such a team is often employed when a major performance is central to the event concept, as in a concert performance, official ceremony or Christmas Pageant. Again, the roles will vary according to the needs and scale of the event. Some of the key roles often found in such a creative team include the following.

Artistic director

The artistic director has a key role in the creative process, and will need to work in close partnership with the event manager. They will control the overall artistic direction of the event, including the selection of other team members, the creation of the program and the selection of performers. Their task is to coordinate all the creative elements of the event, so that they come together in a unified and powerful fashion.

Designer

The designer will create and oversee the visual elements of the event, including sets, props, costumes, and often print collateral such as programs, posters and advertisements. For an outdoor event they might also design banners and site decorations. They will create the overall look of the event, which is a powerful factor in its atmosphere and impact.

Music director

The role of the music director is to arrange and conduct music for the performers. If the program contains original works, they may be involved in working with

composers, and/or writing music for the performances.

Performance coordinator

If a number of performers or groups are involved in the event program, a performance coordinator may be employed to source, contract and oversee performers. They may take an active role in programming, and will work closely with the artistic director and music director.

Technical director

Large productions may require the services of a technical director, who will oversee aspects of the production such as sound, lighting and special effects. They may design specific aspects such as lighting, or work with specialists such as lighting designers, audiovisual producers and pyrotechnicians. Their job is to make sure that the various technical aspects of the production work harmoniously together to support the overall artistic direction of the event.

Production manager

The role of the production manager is to coordinate the physical and logistical aspects of the event. This may include staging, equipment hire and installation, bump-in and rehearsals.

The exact roles, titles and job descriptions of the creative team will vary to suit the specific needs of the event, and the particular tradition from which the event has arisen. Many events are influenced by the theatre tradition, and their roles and terminology are adapted from the theatre. Others are more embedded in audiovisual production, project management or facility management. Individual event managers will adapt these different traditions and roles to suit their own style, and the specific needs of the event. What is ultimately important is that the creative team is a dynamic, cooperative enterprise, fusing individual talents into a unified group with a common artistic purpose and vision. The success of the event manager in managing, leading and motivating the creative team might well be judged by the dictum of the late Theodore Roosevelt:

'The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men (and women) to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.'

Topic summary

The theme and program are the key elements that create unique and different events. In setting out to determine these aspects of an event, you should first consider scanning the environment to determine those factors with potential to influence the success of the event. The scanning process provides a context within which you should then seek answers to the five Ws of event creation – Why?, Who?, When?, Where? and What?. When dealing with the 'What?' aspect of this process, a useful technique that can be employed is

brainstorming, which facilitates a creative exploration of the event concept. Once an event concept and theme have been decided upon, they need to be translated into a consistent look and style, and applied to as many aspects of the event as your resources will allow. Perhaps the most important aspect of theming is the program, which orchestrates the elements of the event to achieve maximum impact on the audience. The role of the event manager is to form, lead and evaluate a creative team to develop and implement the event concept.

References

Goldblatt J. 1997, *Special Events: Best Practices in Modern Event Management*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York.

McDonnell, I., Allen, J. and O'Toole, W. 1999, *Festival and Special Event Management*, John Wiley and Sons, Brisbane.

Appendix Implementing an event concept and theme

Event: Our Town Circus Festival

The 'five Ws' of event creation

Why: To provide a family entertainment experience, and to attract shoppers to the Our Town Centre

Who: Our Town residents, families and visitors

When: Labor Day Holiday Weekend in October

Where: Our Town Park

What: A circus themed day of family entertainment

Theme: The event will be themed around the colours, sights, sounds and spectacle of the circus. Red and yellow stripes and traditional circus style images and lettering will be adopted as the look of the event, with a central stage program of circus style performances.

Publicity: The poster for the event will be designed in the style of traditional circus posters, with a red and yellow background to a large clown image. Newspaper ads and flyers will be designed in a similar style using the same elements.

A circus parade through the main street of Our Town involving all of the performers in the festival will be staged on the Saturday morning prior to the festival. This will draw the attention of the local townspeople to the festival, as well as serving as an opportunity for local television news coverage prior to the event.

Site decoration: Red and yellow striped circus style banners with the words 'Our Town Circus Festival' will be



used to decorate the main street and Our Town Park. A local artist will be commissioned to create an archway supported by two clowns at the main entrance to the park.

Stage: The existing sound shell in the park will be used as the main performance stage. This will be decorated with red and yellow strips of material radiating out from the centre of the roof to suggest the ceiling of a circus Big Top. Red and yellow painted boxes will be placed in a curve at the front of the stage to suggest a circus ring.

Rides: A local carnival proprietor will be invited to run a 'sideshow alley' of carnival stalls, and a children's play area of rides with a carnival/circus theme, e.g. mini ferris wheel, giant slippery dip.

Catering: Traditional circus food, e.g. fairy floss, popcorn and hot dogs, will be served from red and yellow striped fete stalls. These will be supplemented by food

stalls run as fund-raisers by community groups in order to provide choice and variety.

Street theatre: Clowns, stilt-walkers and jugglers will greet the audience on arrival, and will animate sideshow alley, the food stalls area and the stage area between shows. A mini circus parade of all performers through the park to the stage area will begin each of the two performances of the Circus Spectacular.

Compere: An MC in traditional ringmaster costume will compere the stage program.

Program:

- Circus Spectacular
- Circus Medley by Our Town Circus Showband
- Acrobatic act
- Clown routine
- Fire eating and fire juggling
- Tightrope act
- INTERVAL
- Spinning plates act
- Clown routine
- Strong woman act
- Balancing chairs act
- Trapeze act finale