

Planning the perfect event in 8 easy steps...

~ Colin Reade & Peter Turkington

An event can be anything from an employee or corporate seminar to a product launch or media event. The keys to success are preparation, organization and common sense.

You can't go wrong if you:

1. Establish a clear purpose
2. Build solid client relations
3. Search out an appropriate venue
4. Develop a critical path and task lists
5. Carefully research and select any guest speakers
6. Pay attention to the budget
7. Conduct a final check/walk-through
8. Learn from each experience

1. Establish a clear purpose:

The organizational team for any event should begin their planning by determining clear outcomes (i.e. what they want to accomplish). They should develop a statement of objectives and a summary of the key messages that the event is designed to convey. In order to do this, it is important to consider the needs of the audience/participants who will be attending the event. For example, one might consider whether the event is to educate, entertain or raise funds.

2. Build solid client relations:

Solid working relationships are essential for maintaining and growing a business. Word of mouth from satisfied clients can bring more business to your doorstep. Developing and maintaining these kinds of relationships requires constant two-way communication, reporting, openness, and honesty. The first step in building such a relationship is a needs analysis. Find out exactly what the client's needs are and use them to tailor and fine-tune the event.

3. Search out an appropriate venue:

A venue at which to host your event should be a top priority. Speakers, performers, suppliers and sponsors will want to know where the event will be held when you first contact them.

When searching for a suitable venue, consider the following:

- Size of the audience
- Seating plan/floor plan – how chairs or displays will be set up
- Audio visual capabilities – know the locations of power outlets
- Adequate lighting
- Catering – provided by the venue or an outside service

Making a short list of potential venues and visiting them – to see if they meet your requirements – is often beneficial to the selection of a perfect site. The choice of venue should reflect the intended purpose and outcomes the event is designed to achieve.

4. Develop critical path and task lists:

Establish deadlines for the completion of various stages of the event's planning. It is sometimes helpful to work backwards from the date of the event to fill in all the critical dates at which tasks need to be completed. Anticipate possible occurrences that could side-track you in your planning activities and develop contingency plans.

In addition to the critical path, task lists are important to making sure essential activities are achieved on schedule. Task lists keep those responsible for the event organized and provide a record for future event planning.

5. Carefully research and select any guest speakers:

At this point, it is important to note, not all events being planned will require a guest speaker. If, however, you are looking for one, consider the following:

- The speaker should be engaging and suitable to the audience for whom the event is being organized
 - If you are not familiar with the speaker's style and performance, it is important to see and hear them in action
 - Failing the opportunity to go and see them speak at another event, request an audio or video sample – there's nothing that lets the air out of a big event like a keynote speaker that bombs
 - Once an appropriate guest speaker has been chosen, make sure to fully brief them on the event and the topics they should touch on – explaining clearly the objectives they should meet
 - Arrange a date for the speaker to give you any documents to be used as handouts
 - Make arrangements for someone on the organizational team to meet the guest speaker upon their arrival at the event
 - Run through the final details of their part of the event
 - Answer any last minute questions that the speaker might have
 - It is also a good idea to have someone prepared with a 'back-up speech' in case your keynote speaker gets stuck in traffic or has to cancel at the last minute – some speakers have been known to end up at the wrong building, or even the wrong city
 - If the organizational team chooses to open the floor to questions, consider:
 - Anticipating the questions that might be asked and including them in the original briefing of the speaker
- OR
- Have audience members write their questions on cards and collect them during a break so they can be reviewed and handed to the speaker

6. Pay attention to the budget:

Everything has its price. It is important to keep an eye on the budget of your event (costs of audio visual equipment, venue, speakers, security etc.). The organizational team needs to consider there should be pre-registration, a cover charge, or no charge at all. If there is a registration fee, what do people get for it – is dinner included?

7. Conduct a final check/walk-through:

You're down to the final day before the event. Once everything seems to be in place, stop for a second, catch your breath and do a final check. Walk through the agenda minute-by-minute. If there's anything missing or out of place, now is the time to correct it.

8. Learn from each experience:

Keep accurate notes and records of all stages in the planning of the event. Once the dust has settled, conduct an assessment of what worked and what didn't. It is often helpful to collect feedback from the participants/audience at an event through short feedback surveys. Analysis of this information can help to refine and improve future events.

When making note of the success of an event, consider the following questions:

- Was the audience engaged?
- Was the venue suitable?
- Were the event's purpose and objectives fulfilled?

Concluding thoughts:

It pays to remember that what can go wrong usually will go wrong throughout the planning process for a major event. Don't worry about it. We've all been there. Slow down and remember why the event is being planned in the first place. It's reinforcing a wider strategy and moving your organization towards its overall objectives.

The steps outlined above will help you maintain your focus and keep your project on track.