

Event Management: An Experiential Learning Approach

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Abstract

Event Management has become a thriving segment of the hospitality and tourism industry and a normal part of leisure studies programs in colleges and universities. However, most of the courses in event management are lecture-based courses with semester projects planning fictitious events. An experiential approach to teaching event management in which students plan and execute a “real” event is a more meaningful and productive way to teach students about managing events. This paper discusses a course design for teaching event management. The format of the course is discussed along with practical suggestions for implementation.

KEYWORDS: Event management, experiential learning, event tourism

Over the course of the past two years, an experiential learning course in event management, in which the students plan and execute a “real” event, has been modified and refined. The events have been significant in size and scope and have provided a very meaningful and successful avenue for student learning. The course was designed around the event management cycle which includes: goal setting, research, design, planning, implementation, and evaluation. During the course, students are responsible for each of these components of the cycle. They are required to manage a special event from the initial planning stages through implementation, developing skills related to event viability and feasibility planning; budgeting; marketing and public relations; sponsorship; safety and security; debriefing and evaluation.

On the first day of class, the students are given an overall event mission. For example, the event might be an appreciation celebration for a particular group. The class will then work as a team to develop the event. From this point on, they are given creative license to develop the event given a limited initial budget of one

thousand dollars. The students then have the ability to get started and use this money as seed money to find other sponsorships and donations.

One of the first steps for the students is to develop specific and measurable goals for the event and to identify the stakeholders as well as their target market or attendees. Next, the students are tasked with researching event ideas and creating an event design/strategy that meets the event goals. They must decide upon an event strategy during class and then break up into committees for the remainder of the semester. Students are allowed to write down their first and second choices for committee type. This method allows the instructor to assign the students to a committee which is interesting to them and therefore encourages them to explore aspects of the event planning process. The committees have been: Operations, Marketing & Public Relations, Food & Beverage and Hospitality, Décor & Entertainment, Sponsorship & Budget. Since class size is limited to 20 students due to the experiential nature of the course, each committee has four members.

The committees are given specific responsibilities (Table 1), which include communicating and coordinating with the other committees. This has been essential to the success of the course, as it reduces the chance of role confusion and the duplication of work.

TABLE 1:
Sample Committee Responsibilities

Marketing and Public Relations Committee	
1	Establish Committee Goals for the Event
2	Conduct a Needs Assessment
3	Develop a Marketing Plan
4	Obtain Media Sponsorship: Radio, Newspapers, Magazines, Internet, TV, etc.
5	Design Fliers and Posters
6	Write Press Releases
7	Contact Media and Send Press Releases
8	Create a List of Media Contacts
9	Media Sponsorship/Follow-up call to Media
10	Coordinate with Other Committees
11	Photograph VIPs/Sponsors throughout the Event
12	Write Post-Event Press Release and send to Media immediately following the Event
13	Create a Final Summary Report and Presentation
14	Conduct Event Evaluations

Once students have established their committees, each committee begins working on their part of the event plan. Each committee must select a Committee Chair and a Committee Secretary who have specific responsibilities during the semester (Tables 2 and 3). During each class period, the committees update each other on their progress and problem-solve together. Although each committee has their specific responsibilities, the class as a team decides on major components of

TABLE 2:
Committee Chair Responsibilities

Committee Chair
Coordinate and Lead Meetings
Manage Communication between Committees
Meet with other committee chairs once per week to exchange information and give an update on each committee's activities for the week.
Responsible for making sure all assignments are completed and turned in on time.

TABLE 3:
Committee Secretary Responsibilities

Committee Secretary
Take Meeting Minutes
Keep a copy of the timeline and key deadlines.
Send out all meeting notices.
Keep Copies of all RFPs
Keep copies of all correspondence with vendors and sponsors

the event such as event goals, venue, entertainment, and date. The most challenging aspect of managing this learning experience is making sure the committees are communicating effectively and are aware of what others are doing. Having the committee chairs meet separately to update each other has been more successful than simply announcing updates in class.

At a specified date after the mid-point of the semester, the Event Management Team (the entire class) must prepare an event plan proposal presentation. The presentation must be coordinated between all committees who present the plan as a team. In the past, local event professionals have been invited to come and “judge” the event plans and give feedback and suggestions. This has been very powerful and effective in encouraging the students to prepare a top-notch professional presentation. This activity also compels the students to come together as a team before actually having to implement the event. Event Plan Proposal Guidelines are presented in Tables 4 & 5.

Once the Event Plan Proposal has been accepted, the students spend the remainder of the semester working on the details and helping the event come to fruition. This includes working on sponsorships, marketing the event, developing RFPs, managing vendors, developing vendor contracts, ordering rental equipment, finalizing the food and beverage arrangements, developing the event script, and managing the event budget.

TABLE 4:
Event Plan Proposal Part A: Introduction

Event Plan Proposal Presentation Guidelines
<p>The class will be responsible for planning an event from concept to completion. The class will work as a team to produce this event. Each subcommittee will be responsible for their part of the particular event. They will also be responsible for coordinating with the other subcommittees so that the event is planned and run smoothly. The Event Plan Proposal will be presented by the Event Management Team (the class) as one fluid presentation.</p> <p>Event Plan Proposal should include:</p> <p>Part A. Introduction:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mission of the event 2. Goals & Objectives 3. Who are your stakeholders? 4. What is the event strategy? What is the event theme? How will you “wow” the guests? 5. What amenities will you provide? What surprises will you have? 6. Event Budget 7. Event Timeline 8. List of Sponsors 9. Event staff. Will you use volunteers? How will you attract volunteers? Train them? 10. How will you measure event success?

TABLE 5:
Event Plan Proposal Part B: Subcommittee Individual Plan

Event Plan Proposal Presentation Guidelines
<p>Part B. Subcommittee individual plan: Each subcommittee must address the bulleted items outlined in their subcommittee descriptions.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Goals, objectives, and strategy 2. Committee Needs Assessment 3. Committee Timeline 4. Committee Budget- 5. List of Sponsors 6. Staffing/Service Plan-event script for your part of the event-Who is in charge? 7. Communication plan-How do you plan to communicate with your team? 8. How will you minimize risk? 9. How will you evaluate your part of the event? <p>This part of the class project will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A PowerPoint oral presentation (with participation from all group members). • A Written report which will include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cover Page – Table of Contents • Body of Report (items 1-10 above) • Appendix with RFPs correspondence with local vendors and sponsors, and any other event materials: brochures, fliers, event press releases, site plans, etc.

Event Implementation

After all of the careful planning, the big day finally arrives and along with it, a great deal of excitement and anxiety about whether the event will be a success. The operations committee provides each student with an event script which details the event set-up through event break-down. Students are assigned roles during the event such as meeting with vendors to help them set-up, providing VIP hospitality, greeting guests, managing the ticket sales, silent auction, announcements, setting up décor, managing safety, managing the entertainment and the food & beverage, taking photographs, and more. The operations committee is responsible for managing the day of event production and meets with all the students prior to the event set-up to go over the final event script. Should problems arise (and they often do, both in real life and experiential events), the students must think on their feet and solve the problems quickly and creatively. This is a night or day of excitement for the students and when the event is over, the students feel a sense of accomplishment that is apparent. The students are able to see and experience the results of all of their careful planning and hard work.

Event Follow-up and Evaluation

It is very important for the students to complete proper follow-up and evaluation of the event and the event experience. This activity encourages the students to reflect on their learning and to understand that the event management process does not end when the event is over. There are thank-you notes to send to participants, post-event press-releases to send to the media, post-event reports to send to stakeholders and sponsors, and evaluation of the event to improve the process for the next time.

Event Final Report & Presentation

The presentation step allows the students to take pride in their accomplishment and communicate their outcomes. The event final report and presentation is a formal report and evaluation of their event which includes measurements of success such as number of attendees, amount of money raised, attendee survey results, and sponsorship involvement. The report discusses successes as well as areas that needed improvement for the event and the event planning process. Sponsorship agreements, sponsorship contacts, photos, RFPs, and vendor contracts should be included in the appendix of the report. The final presentation contains the report information, includes event photos, and discusses the learning that the students gained from the event experience. The final report and presentation is created and presented by the Event Management Team (the entire class).

Event Evaluations (Individual)

Students are asked to complete individual evaluations of the event, which are critically important for them to reflect on what they have learned and how they may apply what they have learned. The individual evaluations contain three parts. The first part is a self-evaluation of their performance and contribution to the event and the planning process. Students are asked to discuss areas of personal

strengths and areas that they needed improvement on. The second part of the evaluation is to evaluate the event planning process and the event itself from their individual perspective and to articulate what they have learned during the process. The third part of the evaluation is an evaluation of their committee's performance and a peer evaluation of the contribution of each individual in the group.

TABLE 6:
Final Grading Scheme

The students are evaluated using the following grading scheme:	
Event Plan & Committee Presentation	30
Event Execution	30
Event Final Report & Presentation	30
Event Evaluation	10
Total:	100

Other Recommendations

When choosing an event type and mission in the beginning, it is important to choose an event that students can buy into. The bigger and more complex the event, the more the students gain from the learning experience and the more they take ownership of the event. The sense of pride and accomplishment that occurs after the students have planned and implemented an event for 150-500 people, gained significant event sponsorship, raised considerable funds for an important cause, and/or attracted media attention is palpable.

Conclusion

An experiential approach to teaching event management, one in which students plan and execute a "real" event, is a very powerful and meaningful way to teach students about managing events. They learn both the intricate details of event planning and management as well as the consequences of overlooked or unplanned-for situations. They feel more confident in their ability to solve problems and in their skills as event planners. A final class celebration with the students after completion of the final report and presentations is a great way to close the entire learning experience.