



## Event Concept and Theme

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## Theming the Programme

The theme and programme 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 programme, 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.

Factors to take into consideration when developing an event concept

## Environmental Scanning

Before important decisions on the theme and programme 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 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

### **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 day light. The timing of all the events will need to be taken into account. Global factors such as school holidays, public holidays, elections, major sporting events and other events in the same 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 the venue hire and preparation; the capacity of the venue in relation to anticipated number of attendees; ease of parking, transport and access; availability of facilities such as staging, power, water, catering and toilets; flexibility and cooperativeness of the venue management. However the choice of venue will also be an important in 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.

## What?

What concept will best achieve the purpose of the event? Deciding on the event concept will determine the programme 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 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, strange 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 maxim that 'two heads are better than one'.

## The Brainstorming Process

Brainstorming is a popular technique that can be of great use throughout the planning and delivery of an event. It simply requires a group of people to gather together to openly and freely discuss a subject. During discussions, they can suggest options, raise doubts, ask questions, propose alternatives, or suggest improvements; in fact they can say anything that comes to mind. One member of the group should take on the role of scribe, to record every idea, suggestion, question or other point raised during the session, for later consideration and review. (For accuracy and clarity the scribe must be allowed to slow the pace of the brainstorming session - to allow them to catch up and record everything raised - or ask questions to clarify what has been said.

If a manager presents their findings or proposes plans to a group and then 'brainstorms' them, the group can provide a quick and easy sanity check. It is vital that your brainstorming group knows that they are free to say anything that comes to mind and that the group lets their ideas flow.

## How to Develop a Theme for an Event

Themes tend to improve your overall event. A theme will help focus attention on a main topic and provides a unifying factor which will pull the whole event together. The use of a theme will keep your affair from looking disjointed or like it was planned haphazardly. Incorporate your theme into all areas of the event - the invitations, the publicity, registration, food, decorations, and entertainment to reinforce the overall effect.

## Choosing a Theme

There are so many sources from which to draw when choosing a theme. You may want to use an occupation, movie or cartoon character, hobby, special event, place, sports themes, a special song, poem, book or movie, historical eras, foreign countries, just to name a few.

Certain motifs may be more expected, especially if you choose to celebrate around the holidays. Choose themes where you can vary the motif. For example if you choose a Christmas theme, try using angels or bells, if you choose to use Valentine's Day, try using a cupids or animal prints.

If you use a nature theme incorporate the use of plants, flowers, trees and include a variety of colours and textures. The use of butterflies or birds brings a lovely touch of nature to a theme. Use geographic regions in nature to pull a theme together such as the beach, mountains, a lake, or an island.

Typical aspects of an event that the theme might be applied to include:

- Poster(s)
- Entrances
- Brochure(s)
- Staff uniforms
- Staging
- Catering facilities
- Print, radio, TV ads
- Sets and costumes
- Site decoration
- Compare
- Banners/signage
- Performers

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.

## Creative Elements

### Motif

The motif is the visual representation of your theme, which is created by the use of objects or symbols. If you use the theme "Promises" you may want to incorporate the use of a rainbow or teacups to represent Friendship. This symbol may be repeated on your invitations, programme, plates, or decorations. Sometimes the use of several different symbols will be used as components of the theme.

Develop your motif using a list of words related to the theme. Brainstorm a list to create your pool of ideas. This list is very important for generating ideas that can be applied to all areas of the event. For a Parisian theme you might come up with words like cafe, arches, artist, Eiffel Tower, springtime, April, showers,

### **Mood**

Decide on what atmosphere or mood you want to create. This is where you want to refer back to your list of words you brainstormed. Add words to the list that will portray your mood. If you choose a mediaeval theme you may include rich heavy brocade and velvet fabric, use Gothic lettering on your programmes or invitations. Create a feel and a mood that is uniform throughout.

### **Colour**

Select a colour scheme that you will use throughout the theme. Two or three colours work well. Colours will make a big impact so be sure they are ones that will complement your theme. Pastels do well with spring, flowers, garden, or country themes. Mix one or two rich solid colours with a theme pattern for a dramatic effect. Mardi Gras would suggest the use of purple, green and gold. Purple represents justice, green represents faith, and gold represents power. Bold solid colours add to the carnival atmosphere.

### **Texture**

Incorporating texture will make things look and feel interesting. Using textures will amplify the atmosphere you are creating. For a princess or medieval theme you could use silks, satins, velvet, pearls, nautical themes might be better suited to cottons & linen, beach sand and shells.

### **Mesh**

Use colour, theme, mood to communicate the message, the emotions, the spirit of the event. Again apply the theme, mood, colour, texture to mesh your theme throughout your overall event.

## Topics of Theme Parties

### Theme: Under the Sea



### Carnival Theme

A festive carnival suited to any event, be it music, Rio or a street party. You could select the colours you would like to use.



Love Theme



## Halloween

Costume parties don't have to be scary. Princesses, knights, cowboys and all sorts of strange animals have made their way to Halloween parties.

What goes into creating a successful theme party?

Be careful which theme you choose. An organisation that largely caters to seniors may not want to choose a Halloween theme. However partygoers may jump at the chance to try their hands at the casino tables. All generations will enjoy a trip back in time but all generations may not enjoy a Mardi Gras party. Consider the guest list when deciding which theme will be great for the perfect party. If possible, take a formal or informal survey of potential guests. You must decorate. What is a Halloween party without a few spider webs and spooky ghost hanging around? If you are on a budget, finding great decorations can be challenging. Don't limit yourself to the party store down the street. The Internet has a wealth of online stores that have great decorations at the price.

Stay with the theme from the beginning. Find invitations that are suited for what will happen the night of the party. Serve foods that coincide with the theme. This is easy if you are doing a Halloween theme because there are many ideas in magazines and books. If you are having trouble figuring out 'theme foods' keep it simple. Have a cake (or several depending on the crowd) that reflects the theme. Finally, be creative and create your own theme. If the members of your organisation love a television show, create a theme party around that show. Have the guests come dressed as their favourite characters. Your themes are only limited by your imagination.

## Programming

Perhaps the most important aspect of theming is the programme. 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 programme, 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 programme - 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 programme 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 programme 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 programmes, 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 programme 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 programme, 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.'

### **Further Reading:**

- ✓ *Event Management, (2010) By Lynn Van der Wagen*
- ✓ *Event Power: How Global Events Manage and Manipulate, (2013) By Chris Rojek*
- ✓ *The Routledge Handbook of Events, (2012) edited by Stephen Page, Joanne Connell*