



Community Event Planning

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This book is for sale at http://leanpub.com/community_event_planning

This version was published on 2013-07-23



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Chapter 1: Getting Started

Quick start guide: the essentials

- Decide what sort of event you want to have, and what its goals will be.
- Recruit people to help.
- Find a venue, set a date.
- Create a budget and develop a fundraising plan.
- Send out announcements through all relevant channels.
- Sell tickets or gather RSVPs.
- Plan the activities or content.
- Arrange for wifi, food, seating, swag, etc., as needed.
- Organize on site volunteer help as needed.
- Show up on time the day of your event.
- Thank everyone for participating, and gather feedback.
- Plan the next one.

Why do we have events?

Before we dive into the details of how to plan an event, let's take a few moments to think about why we have in-person events. Global interconnectivity means that we have more opportunity than ever before to conduct remote gatherings. Why, then, do we expense the effort and expense for physical gatherings?

To share knowledge When we gather in person we are able to share knowledge with greater efficacy and fidelity than through any other means. When we share the same physical space as one another, we have access to all layers of communication, including non-verbal information that is generally lost in meetings conducted entirely online. Physical gatherings also provide opportunities for conversations between people who would not otherwise cross paths.

To get stuff done Well-organized events are fantastic opportunities to get specific, quality work done in a fixed amount of time.

To play We gather not only to get things done, but also to socialize and to enjoy one another's company.

To build community All of the above: sharing knowledge, building things, and enjoying each other's company while doing so creates a sense of belonging among those who participate. This sense of belonging is the foundation upon which community is built and maintained.

Types of events

Types of events with costs, order of magnitude on costs, planning time and effort.

Code sprint or hackathon

Description A gathering to develop software, documentation, or designs for a particular project or topic.

Budget \$0-300

Planning time next week or six months from now, as easy or as complicated as you like

BarCamp or unconference

Description An open space event where content is created by the attendees.

Cost \$2-7k

Planning time at least 2-3 months planning for the best result

Ignite

Description A fast-paced event with multiple speakers who give short talks

Cost \$500-3k

Planning time 3+ months planning

Training Course/Workshop

Description For teaching a programming language or other piece of technology.

Cost \$200-500

Planning time a month to several months, depending on whether you have to develop new materials

Conference

Description An event with a number of talks from different speakers, often spread over more than one day

Cost: \$20-100k and up

Planning time: 6 months to a year lead time

Party

Description A PARTY!

Cost: \$200 and up

Planning time: 2 weeks and up

Sample timeline

This is a timeline for WhereCampPDX 2012.

Early July

- Confirm dates and venue reservation for event in October
- Start putting the word out for sponsors

Mid-July or early August

- Have a kickoff planning meeting
- Send out announcements with event details
- Update the website to have this year's details
- Post event announcement on the blog and twitter
- Create budget

August

- More fundraising
- More outreach—send announcements to groups we want to be sure to include
- Start gathering session ideas on the wiki
- Line up a keynote speaker
- Blog post about keynote speaker and session ideas
- Find a venue for the Saturday night hackathon
- Solicit ideas for Sunday activities (if we're doing them this year?)

September

- Work out catering plans, including coffee
- One more sponsorship push
- Design and order t-shirts and other swag
- Recruit volunteers to help out day-of

October

- Finalize last minute venue and food details
- Go shopping for sticky notes, pens, snacks, and other supplies
- Have the event!

Assembling and organizing your team

Who do you need?

Your team starts with you. (Hi!) After that, at a minimum you need one other enthusiastic collaborator to help you. Many small to medium size events can be produced with a crew of 5-8 people (this is generally a good size for a working group).

Don't try to overspecialize, especially for smaller events. A team with good communication, sharing the work across a range of areas, will get things done faster and in a more resilient manner than one where each person is solely in charge of one thing.

Sometimes you do need to split duties off into sets: perhaps one person handles most of the venue details because you're using their office meeting rooms. Just try to avoid the situation where you tell someone, "here, go deal with fundraising" and then forget to check on them for two months. Really. We've never had that one work out right.

Work in pairs, small groups, and when things get big, create sub-committees. Check in with each other often. (Do we need to say that again? Talk to each other!). Avoid creating a single point of failure by letting anyone run off and do their own thing in an undocumented manner.

Some roles you may need to cover:

- leadership roles such as chair, co-chair, or committee lead (for very small events, this is essentially just the person who sends out meeting reminders and keeps track of the to do list)
- logistics (with A/V, catering, and wifi sub-areas)
- content or speaker selection
- communications, marketing, outreach
- fundraising and sponsorship
- volunteer coordination
- party or other side-event planning

How do you find people?

If your event focuses on a specific project or technology, start with the user groups and community mailing lists for that technology. Start telling people what the event is that you want to create, what your goals are, and when you're aiming to have it happen. Once you have a handful of people who might be interested, you can throw a kick-off meeting to discuss the goals and general plans, get all your ideas in one place, and figure out who's interested in working on which parts of the event.

If you're not sure what the core community for your event topic is, it's going to take more research. You might start by looking for people who are doing work that is similar to the content you want to bring to the event, and ask them where they go to find colleagues, online or in person. It may take longer to find your collaborators, but they're out there somewhere. This is also a practice run for finding the people you want to attend and participate in your event. Seeking out those initial collaborators and participants is community-building.

Open planning process

This is a good time to start practicing an open planning process. This means that you make every effort to keep your planning activities transparent, well-documented, and open to new people who want to participate. Here are some tools we've found useful:

1. Announce your kick-off meeting and all other planning meetings through your local community's tech calendar and/or public mailing lists. Send meeting invitations anywhere else that seems relevant.
2. Set up a new public mailing list for planning the event, and encourage people who come to the planning meetings to join it.
3. Assign a note taker at each meeting, and post the notes to the mailing list immediately afterward. Keep track of open tasks, deadlines, and other reminders that will help your planning team jump in and get work done. We like to put those items at the top of the email so they can't be missed.
4. Set up a wiki to archive the meeting notes, and hold other documentation about how you've decided to run your event. This wiki also can have an attendee section for people to share unconference session ideas, their favorite places to eat, tips about transportation, or other activities to do before and after the event.
5. Consider using a collaborative editing tool like Etherpad to take meeting notes, and draft blog posts and emails the team will use to communicate about the event.
6. Invite attendees from the first event to become part of the planning team for subsequent events.

Why do we work this way? One of the hardest things about running a community-driven event over time is that the team becomes tired. People develop burnout, or have babies, or move or change jobs. You have to keep the energy up, and continue to have the resources to run events, and the only way that can happen is if you continue to bring new people into your planning process. It keeps the process healthy. Plus, it's the Open Source Way.

Notes