

# *Thousands of Moving Parts*

BY JASON HENSEL





## **Festival planning is a complex team effort requiring a massive amount of coordination—regardless of the event’s size.**

**F**estival season used to be relegated to the summer, when the weather was good and people took vacations. Then it started sliding into spring and fall before rolling into winter. Now festival season is year-round, and every year there are more festivals for fans of any persuasion to choose from.

Consider this: 32 million people attend at least one music festival per year, per Nielsen Music, and of that number, 14.7 million are millennials. It’s reasonable then to think that younger generations consider festivals the norm rather than a special event, unlike 20 or 30 years ago. This raises the question of how to appeal to a generation expecting large-scale events and how to properly plan them to meet those expectations.

“The planning process, if done right, is extremely detailed,” says Jennifer Forkish, vice president of corporate communications for Caesars Entertainment. “The producer and their team has to think of everything from securing talent to marketing strategies and deciding what type of experience they want to give their guests. The operational standpoint is equally as detailed, talking to stage designers, health and safety providers as well as coordinating with the venue, elected/government officials, local law enforcement and members of the hospitality community.”

And all these steps can take up to a year.

“The timeline can also be impacted by factors like permitting, if you’ve already produced a show at the same venue and the size of the crowd,” says Forkish, who has an extensive background in producing and marketing festivals. “It’s a team effort that can require the coordination and planning of hundreds, or even thousands, of moving parts and individuals.”

Team coordination is a top priority when organizing festivals, as outlined in the blog post “The Real Truth About Event Logistics and Festival Management” by Ryan Kirk, CEO of Prepared, a New York-based production management company.

“If you do a lot of event planning, you’re likely comfortable working with multiple reps and points of contact,” wrote Kirk, who has more than 15 years of experience producing live events. “Festivals are similar but also add the dimension of how you assign roles to your internal team. But you always assign roles, right? Yes, but festival work is a whole other level of autonomy within your team. I’ve worked festivals where I might not see two of my fellow production managers for several days. We’re on opposite sides of town, overseeing load-ins at different venues. You’ve got to know how to match up your team’s skills with the needs of the venue or slate

of activities. I'll often poll my team to see who might be the best fit in each scenario."

## Planning Strategy

"Many of the operational details such as working with local decision makers, securing a venue and the proper permits can be just as complex regardless of how big the show is," Forkish says. "Strategy is often dictated by stage design, number of stages, operating hours, use of pyrotechnics, number of artists you need to book and the anticipated size of the crowd."

The planning strategy for non-music festivals is similar. Consider the Newport Beach Film Festival in California, which draws more than 55,000 attendees.

**"Over the next five years, we'll see an increase in smaller, more experience-focused festival events, especially those that emphasize food and beverage, activities and destinations."**

"Planning the Newport Beach Film Festival is a logistically complex process. Not only are we working with the normal (if there is such a thing) pressures and issues that any event of this size would include, but we are also dealing with multiple, simultaneous events that surround the festival and its core activities," Gregg Schwenk, CEO and executive director of the festival, told **EventPlanning.com**. "During the Newport Beach Film Festival, we will produce 18 special events that range in size from 90 people to nearly 3,000. We will coordinate the participation of over 60 restaurants and 20 retailers."

For the Newport Beach Film Festival, staying consistent in terms of quality and professionalism have led it to become one of the premier U.S. film events.

"A festival is not going to make money in its first year, but it's crucial that fans have a great experience at your event and that it doesn't feel too crowded or commercialized, that the grounds are clean, lines for food aren't too long and the event staff is friendly and professional," says Dave Brooks, founder and executive editor of Amplify Media Inc. and a festival industry expert. "A bad reputation is usually what sinks a festival."

No matter the size or content, though, each festival tries to create its own identity.

"Whether it's the genre of the artists performing, focusing on production and art or incorporating local food vendors, I think most of the mainstream and most popular festivals all generally follow similar planning procedures as their future success often depends on it," Forkish says.

Future success is another interesting point, considering the number of music festivals produced each year. Can the momentum continue?

"With the festival explosion in the late 2000s, the festival calendar is now overcome with too many festivals in close proximity to each other, leading to overkill," wrote Pete

and large-scale promoters. Small festivals birthed super concerts and may ultimately be devoured by their own spawn, taking the freedom these small festivals allow and turning it into a modified police state."

## Safety and Security

It can't be emphasized enough: Safety and security is paramount to a festival's success no matter its size.

"Running a safe and secure festival—while also creating a fun environment—has become key to long-term success, especially as the media has become more interested in festival operations," Forkish says. "If a producer is looking to establish a festival in a location for the long term, it's critical to have buy-in from local stakeholders, so that if something were to go wrong they know you and have been a part of the planning process themselves."

She says the security process at festivals is probably more thorough than even airport security, noting that festivals use ID scanners to help ensure that attendees are old enough to enter, pat downs, metal detectors and bag checks.

"Working for Insomniac/Live Nation taught me how important it is to work for a company that cares about entertaining the fan through unique experiences while also doing the right thing," Forkish says. "The two don't have to be mutually exclusive. I think their commitment to delivering unique experiences in a safe environment has helped them create a reputation that fans can trust."

Brooks suggests two ways to encourage a safe experience.

"A thorough, professional screening as fans enter the facility and an alert staff looking to assist individuals who are too intoxicated to properly care for themselves," he says. "People are usually the biggest threat to themselves at these events."

Another consideration for determining success is cost.

"The costs to produce a festival can be a cause of failure," Forkish says. "Securing top talent can be very expensive as can venue rental fees and the costs associated with marketing and making the event safe. These costs can negate the revenue generated by ticket sales or other sources of income. Many producers take a big financial hit for the first few years they produce a new festival in the hopes that it will become profitable in the long run."



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# The Music Festival of the Future

Sparks & Honey, a New York-based marketing/advertising/PR firm, partnered with PepsiCo to find out how music festivals will evolve in the future. They identified six characteristics: local and tribal, frictionless, customized, non-temporal, ritualistic and transformational (excerpted below).

## Local and Tribal

"As festivals proliferate, new festival goers will opt for local festivals with a smaller cash outlay as a stepping stone to the fuller festival experience. Promoters, and the music industry, will respond to this downward price pressure by promoting festivals that go deep in a specific genre vs. broad, as larger destination festivals do today. Smaller local music festivals proliferate, serving as the stepping stone for a few large, unique festival experiences."

## Frictionless

"Festival goers of tomorrow will expect technology to eliminate the need to carry a wallet, and make carrying a phone optional. Technology will not only enable frictionless transactions, but will also support frictionless social networking, social safety and social content sharing and consumption."

## Customized

"Having come of age during a time of unprecedented consumer choice and control, tomorrow's festival attendee will expect to be able to curate their festival experience to explore, discover, immerse, connect, withdraw and detox on their terms, at their pace, on premise and off."

## Non-temporal

"Music festivals will lose the notion of defined space and time. Augmented and virtual reality, holograms, live-streaming and the next wave of social media platforms will not only enhance the on-premise experience, but will enable the festival to be consumed and re-lived on demand by tomorrow's consumer."

## Ritualistic

"To create meaning and unique branding for their festivals, promoters will crowdsource rituals and traditions that are evolving beyond basic festival guidelines. Tomorrow's music festivals will offer more defined rituals that add purpose to the party."

## Transformational

"The music festival of the future will more explicitly deliver against the human needs for authentic connection and transformation that they may not be getting from other aspects of their lives. The music festival attendee of tomorrow will leave with a memorable experience that renders them changed in some meaningful way. Tomorrow's music festival will be equal parts concert, university and higher-order fulfillment center, with a dash of political activism thrown in for good measure."

## Going Forward

Brooks is bullish about the festival industry.

"[It's] very strong right now and attendance is still climbing, although preferences are changing," he says. "Over the next five years, we'll see an increase in smaller, more experience-focused festival events, especially those that emphasize food and beverage, activities and destinations."

And when you're ready to produce a large-scale festival, remember to prepare, prepare

and prepare.

"Festival management at its best is a crazy, glorious whirlwind and it can be some of the most rewarding work you'll ever do," Kirk wrote in "The Real Truth About Event Logistics and Festival Management." "By building your experience, hiring the right people, strengthening your communication processes and empowering your team, you'll be ready for anything."

And being ready for anything is a trait

event planners are known for, which will help ensure the success of any festival they plan.

"Be organized, be professional and understand the nuance complexities that each festival brings," Schwenk told **Event Planning.com**. "Build strong partnerships and relationships with your vendors and stakeholders. Respect your audience and your artists. Most of all, never forget to enjoy the process as much as the audience enjoys your event." ■