add some zest to your spring fest!

By Jason Haseman

Does your programming board or class plan the annual spring fest? It is the most anticipated and celebrated event of the semester. The explanation for that is a mystery to many of your fellow students.

What are the programmers talking about? Is your spring fest a Who's Who of programming? The spring fest is a tradition that goes back to the achievement of the public. It is a tradition to carry on from year to year. The only problem with the spring fest is that programmers have to come up with something new every year.
Planning committees often get so wrapped up in their own ideas they forget to ask the rest of the student body what they would like to see at the event. Set aside some time for the committee to survey students to find out what would add some zest to their spring fest experience. If the planning committee feels they do not have the money needed to bring in everything they want to the event, consider group fund-raising. Students may be willing to pitch in a few bucks if they know it could result in a certain band performing at the event. You could even sell event T-shirts in advance, which would not only supplement funds but provide publicity, too.

Themes
When choosing a theme for your festival, make sure you select one that will be easy to promote. While you want to be original, choosing something that is too off-the-wall will only confuse your student body. For example, you shouldn’t have to spend time explaining what Total Request Festival is all about. At Towson University (MD), our spring festival is called Tigerfest in honor of the school’s mascot. Our last four themes have been “Wild West,” “Twisted,” “Cinco de Mayo” and “Under the Boardwalk.” None of these concepts were too outside-the-box and they made the event easier to promote and the accompanying novelties we chose easier to select.

Be sure to choose a theme that is universal enough to appeal to all audiences. Choosing a hip-hop theme or a decade-related theme could possibly isolate pockets of your student body. Since many festivals involve barbecues or food in general, choosing a theme that allows for corresponding food is also a good idea. For example, Cajun, Tex-Mex or luau themes lend themselves to great food options.

Sponsorship
In tight budget times, remember that your programming board does not have to supply each and every dime to fund your event. Solicit the help of fellow student organizations or administrative offices and academic departments. Ask the alumni office if there are any individuals who may have a unique interest in donating to this event. Find the office on campus that deals with corporate sponsorship and community partnerships and ask them to connect you to businesses that may be willing to help. If you’re going to seek outside sponsorship, though, it’s always advisable to check with the university administration first so you don’t violate any exclusive contracts (i.e. bringing Coca-Cola to a Pepsi campus).

If you can involve local businesses, ask for funding assistance in exchange for name recognition. For what they can offer, it’s not that hard to put their name on your event’s T-shirts or posters. You can also have local vendors or craft dealers pay for table space at the event. Vendors will often pay good money to have prime space in front of hundreds or thousands of
Entertainment

We know the average student wants Dave Matthews, Jay-Z and Britney Spears to perform at your annual spring festival. However, programming boards must have a more realistic point of view and need to think a bit more creatively and economically about their on-field entertainment. If you have great talent on your campus, which you likely do, consider showcasing student bands throughout the day. When it comes to music on a nice spring day, most students just want to hear songs they know and can sing along to. With that in mind, you can often satisfy the crowd's desire with cover bands or local bands. So even if you can't bring Jimmy Buffet or the late, great Bob Marley, you can surely find an affordable tribute band to play their songs.

When it comes to national acts, we all wish we had the budget to bring M.T.V.'s hottest artist to the stage. A better idea is to seek out those acts that are up and coming and well on their way to being household names. Check with local concert venues to see who is selling out shows, read Billboard or Pollstar to see who is rising on the charts, and read NACA's artist performance reports online for ideas and comments from others schools. Make it your goal to one day say, "I brought so-and-so to campus before they were huge!" Whomever you decide to bring in, strive to make sure it will appeal to a wide variety of audiences. Just because radio stations don't often mix hop-hop, rock and country in the same format doesn't mean you can't. While you may never satisfy everyone, at least you can provide enough variety to give each student something to look forward to.

Lastly, consider hiring a deejay, comedian or celebrity to entertain the crowd between acts. Silence often ruins the momentum of a show, so fill the void with music, jokes or contests. A high-profile deejay or reality television star can be very affordable and can give your event another big name attraction.

Novelties

A spring festival without novelties is like a beach without the ocean or a zoo without animals. Chances are, you can fit a lot more than just a stage on your quad or ball field. So what else are you going to put out there to make your festival...well, festive? The safe way to go is to find a package of inflatables and carnival games to cover the field. Whether it's a giant climbing wall or a huge water slide, the bottom line is that your field looks crowded, colorful and fun. Many companies may be able to offer a series of inflatables and games that will accompany your theme. For example, in our case, Wild West Tigerfest was an easy fit for a rodeo, cow milking, bull riding and casino games.

Along with inflatables and games, consider hiring roving artists to entertain your crowd. Balloon artists, caricaturists and illusionists are just a few possibilities. If your festival is open to the community, strive to make your attractions family friendly because young children are often enamored with novelties and sideshow performers.

Finally, seek out those companies offering free promotional tours on college campuses. There are many companies that will bring interactive games and give away free products at your event so they get valuable publicity in front of all your students. Radio stations may also jump at the opportunity to broadcast live from your event.

Promotion

Promotion is key to a successful festival. You can have the most amazing musical lineup and field attractions, but if your students don’t know the what, where and when of your event, you might wind up battling yourself on the inflatable joust.

Promoting your spring festival gives your programming board a great chance to get creative. Think about all the things you can do beyond the standard posters and flyers. One of the best techniques for promotion is to build suspense by doing it on a gradual, week-by-week basis. You might start by revealing only the date, following that with the announcement of one of your musical artists and so on until you finally unleash your complete promotional blitz.

For example, to promote Wild West Tigerfest, Towson University's Campus Activities Board followed a promotional
timetable. Four weeks from the event, we constructed cactuses out of wire, which happened to be shaped like the number "4." Three weeks away, we randomly placed bails of hay across campus. Two weeks out, we rented a horse costume and had a student galloping through campus.

With one week until the event, we handed out small giveaways to remind students about the date, time and theme. Our giveaways included pens in the shape of cowboy boots and miniature Frisbees®. Members of the planning committee wore sheriff's badges and cowboy hats as they paraded across campus. This subtle promotion was all done in conjunction with print and media advertising.

If you have the ability to play music on campus, set up information tables and highlight the artists appearing at the event. Use media outlets, both on and off campus, to promote your festival. Prepare a press release and ask your university relations office to fax or e-mail it to as many radio, television and newspaper outlets as possible. If you want to involve the student body in your promotion, consider having a logo design contest or a scavenger hunt with theme-related prize packages.

The Spiciest Fest Yet

What’s better than a campus with great traditions? Taking a great tradition and spicing it up so your fellow students are left to wonder what you have up your sleeve each year. You’ve all heard people say, “don’t reinvent the wheel” or “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Well, change doesn’t have to be bad. Be proactive and reinvent your festival each year rather than wait for the student body’s enthusiasm to dwindle. If every party you went to had the same theme, played the same music and had the same guests, it might get a bit predictable and dry. Use your position of leadership to diverge from your normal recipe and make this year’s spring festival the most creative, spiciest event yet.

About the Author

Jason Heiserman is assistant director of Student Activities at Towson University (MD). He currently serves as advisor to the Campus Activities Board and Student Involvement coordinator at the school. In 2004, he was named the school’s Outstanding Student Organization Advisor. In NACA, he served as the commission liaison for Leadership and Student Development for the 2002 NACA National Convention and as a staff member for the 2002 Student Government-East workshop. In addition, he has presented educational sessions at NACA National Conventions, regional conferences and workshops. He holds a bachelor’s degree in speech communication and a master’s degree in college student personnel, both from James Madison University (VA).