

Event Planning 101

Introduction

Whether you prefer the title “event steward”, in the modern SCA vernacular, or “autocrat”, which is Old School, historical and all too accurate, the job is the same—running a successful event. Here are a few critical points for planning a successful event from the beginning.

The student should be warned that this teacher abhors exorbitant profit from events, i.e., more than \$2 per person from gate. When two successive events can be run from the same site and Group A charges \$5 while Group B charges \$10, someone is just being greedy. No group grows from being greedy!

In 20 years of serving as an autocrat and head cook, the author has found the balance between profit and pain to be around \$7 for both site and feast fees...below that point and the group is generous and benevolent. However, above that point and fees start begging the question of “What am I getting for that?” Responsible stewardship of an event serves to allay such concerns and ultimately build the group and its reputation.

Basics

The secret to a successful event...both financially and emotionally...is to keep things simple. The less complicated the event is, the saner the autocrat remains. To simplify the planning phase, answer a few basic questions:

1. Is this the first event of this type for your group?
2. Are there established traditions for this event?
3. What do you need the site to have?
4. How many people do you expect?
5. What can the group afford to lose monetarily?

As you notice, some of the questions have to do with the event and others with the money...these are always intertwined but the money takes precedence. With regard to groups like the SCA, non-profit implies that all excess funds are used for the promotion of the group and its mission. And, no matter how much fun folks have, if you take a loss on the event, you are injuring the group and your personal reputation; conversely, if you charge people through the nose, you will hurt the group’s reputation—and the long-term prospects for any future events.

Financial

Consider the money first since it is fairly straightforward. Remember, the autocrat should answer these questions in accordance with financial policies of the group and concurrence of the financial committee. Work from the last question forward.

What can the group afford to lose?

While the group’s financial policies may be more restrictive, SCA Corporate policy limits a single event to 50% of the bank account and good sense dictates a limit of 45% of the bank account. These are hard limits, which include all event costs that cannot be recovered if the event were cancelled. Typically, unrecoverable costs include feast costs, site deposit, and site

fee (for sites with a fixed cost). Again, as the autocrat, do not presume that you can assume this risk on behalf of the group without agreement of the financial committee.

How many people do you expect?

Draw on historical data—do not guess. Unless the event has an established tradition, use an overall average for other events hosted by your group or in your area by other groups of comparable size. If the event is established, e.g., held two or three times, past event reports will give a good average number. From these numbers, you can estimate an expected attendance. This number will serve as the basis for calculating a reasonable breakeven attendance, which will help determine a reasonable site fee.

Breakeven attendance is the number of people through gate required to keep the event in the black. Generally, a figure of 75% of normal attendance is good for planning. For example, if the event normally has 100 gentles, calculate the site fee based on 75 people. That is, if 75 people attend, then all costs are covered—but the group will not clear a profit...it will break even.

Calculating Site Fees

To carry this calculation out for a site with a fixed cost, an event expects 100 people to attend and the expected site costs total \$650 (\$550 for site; \$100 for copying, toilet paper, etc.) Assuming a breakeven of 75 people, the site fee should be \$8.50 (rounded to nearest half-dollar). If 100 people attend as anticipated, the group will net \$200 (profit of \$2 per person)...although, \$8.50 is a bit pricey. And \$10 per person for this site (profit of \$3.50 per person) is what this author considers exorbitant.

The calculation is somewhat different for sites with a cost per head. Use 40% of normal attendance—rather than 75%—for breakeven attendance. Assuming the same attendance (100 total; 40 breakeven) and miscellaneous costs (\$100), the site fee to be added to the cost per head is \$2.50 (rounded to nearest half-dollar), which recovers the operating costs. If the site cost per head is \$3.50, then the site fee is \$6. If 100 people attend, the group will net approximately \$150 (profit of \$1.50 per person).

Keep in mind that a cost-per-head site clears only a portion of each site fee while a fixed-cost site clears the entire site fee after the breakeven point. Again, avoid the temptation to charge \$10 for such a site...the populace will be less than pleased to find they paid twice what the site cost—and they *will* eventually find out.

Controlling Feast Costs

The site cost does not address feast cost...all feasts must be self-supporting! It should not be left to the attendees to subsidize a poorly planned feast—that is the head cook's job and ultimately the head cook's reputation. However, the autocrat should establish the number of feast slots and cost per head in concurrence with the head cook and financial committee. The feast budget (feast slots x cost per head) should be finalized within two weeks of announcing the autocrat/head cook...and preferably submitted with the event bid. A feast menu without a budget is not merely inadequate; it is a disaster waiting to happen. A clear understanding between autocrat and head cook is essential to the success of the event.

A sound meal can be produced for \$4.00 to \$4.50 per person and a sumptuous feast for \$5.50 to \$5.75. While smaller feasts may require slightly more per person, a responsible cook does not need more than this unless extraordinary circumstances arise, e.g., meat prices skyrocket. However, devotion to a specific menu—even published—is not adequate justification for a cost per person in excess of \$6.50...menus can always be adjusted and announced. Keep in mind, these numbers are the cost—not the feast fee. The feast fee should add \$1.00 to \$1.50 per person (to make it an even dollar amount).

Financial Summary

1. Do not exceed 45% of the group's available funds.
2. Use historical numbers to calculate a reasonable site fee.
3. Employ reasonable breakeven points: 75% for fixed cost; 40% for per-head cost.
4. Establish a clear feast budget and keep the feast costs separate.

Thematic

Now that the finances are in hand, the autocrat needs to address the event-specific aspects. While the topic/focus/theme of the event may ultimately have financial impacts, the calculations above can address them. Also, this class does not address the positive and/or negative attributes of specific events or themes; instead, it looks at the nuts and bolts of planning an event. To that end, consider the remaining questions.

What do you need the site to have?

Consider that question carefully. It asks what is “needed”, not what is “wanted”. Many times an autocrat will be expected to provide, i.e., to purchase, items or services, which are not necessary though perhaps convenient. The autocrat's responsibility is to carefully differentiate between the two...especially if the convenience is for a small group of individuals. The SCA has some very specific limitations on spending money for the benefit of small groups.

As to needs, consider the basics: 1) water, 2) protection from the elements, and 3) human waste disposal. Address each of these basic needs, in turn: Are they available at the site? If not, identify the steps necessary to make them available or to make the populace aware of their absence.

For developed sites, these basic needs are addressed by the site itself...but ensure that they are not only available but adequate for the size of event. Septic systems can be overwhelmed by a large event and additional portable toilets become necessary. Make sure to clearly communicate to the site owner/manager the size and extent of the event.

For primitive sites, make sure that the attendees (especially out-of-town attendees) are made aware prior to the event. If running water is not available, clearly announce the need for people to bring water with them. If no hall is available, obtain sufficient public tents to allow people to come in from the weather. If no public toilets are available, provide for portable toilets—and include some handicap-accessible toilets (about one in four is usually adequate).

Are there established traditions for this event?

Having established traditions is a mixed blessing. For an autocrat who wants to truly change some aspect of the event, you will have to overcome the inertia of these traditions. For the most part, however, traditions can help to simplify planning. Established traditions work as primary guidelines to follow in planning. Some examples are titled champions, fighting format, or time period. The difficulty is in changing established aspects; however, adding something new is less troublesome—so long as the other items remain intact.

Whenever possible, let the officers organize the activities. Do not assume they will do the job! Ask them to help. Again, some activities may be the responsibility of the previous champions. Still, ensure that the officers are involved—whether they are providing support for the champions or running the activities themselves. Work to involve as many people in the event as you can.

Although much of this has addressed established events, a new event still has the same issues with running activities and the first-time activities will serve as precedents. As such, be mindful that the activities are consistent with the theme...and that too many are not attempted, i.e., make sure you have someone running every activity without too much overlap. You need to make sure that you do not allow someone to become overcommitted—spread the load as evenly as possible.

Is this the first event of this type for your group?

If so, you basically have free run to shape the event. Since this will establish the precedent for years to come, involve the populace. As the autocrat, you will have to sort out the varying recommendations but you took the job and will have to shape the consensus. Remember, you will probably not be the autocrat for some time hereafter. So, make this an event that is pleasantly remembered and that can be continued for years to come.