

**Strengthening Community Relationships:
Key to Successful Festival and Special Events
by Steven W. Burr, Ph.D.**

Festival and special events are one of the fastest growing types of tourism attractions. Even in small towns of less than one thousand people, it is not uncommon to see two to three major festivals held per year (Engler, 1994). Because of their proliferation and the magnitude of some of these events, it has been suggested that festival and special events are one of three major categories of tourism attractions (Getz, 1991). As such, festival and special events can complement the other two major categories of ambient attractions, such as climate, scenery, culture, hospitality, and wildlife, and permanent attractions, such as theme parks, historical sites, sports facilities, convention centers, and sacred sites.

Community Relationships: Key to Success

- Strengthening community relationships is key to successful festival and special events. Efforts here can occur at two distinct levels. At an intra-community level, relationships within a community are crucial. At an extra-community level, relationships with other communities in a particular region and with other organizations outside of the region become important.

There is considerable evidence supporting the importance of strengthening relationships within a community in order to facilitate successful festival and special events. First, local leaders as the “movers and shakers” and the “spark plugs” provide the driving force for festival and special events. They provide leadership and in terms of strengthening relationships, get others actively involved and coordinate activities of different agencies and organizations. Reliance on volunteers is critical to an event’s success. The success of many projects has rested upon the demonstration capacity of local leaders and officials to coordinate efforts among local residents and both local and outside agencies (Borich & Fleming, 1993). As volunteers working with local leaders, such leaders unselfishly work on key committees throughout the year, up-front or behind-the-scenes. The result of this process of overall involvement and strengthening relationships can be an infectious ownership of a festival or special event by all of the community.

Second, the long-term success of such events is likely to depend on the extent to which events identify and respond not only to needs and wants of visitors, but also to those of community residents (Mayfield & Crompton, 1995a). Small festivals developed by townspeople and scaled to their tastes seem to be successful. It is important to listen to the local people and to pay attention to the real spirit of the place (Engler, 1994). To be a successful effort takes creativity and a strong community spirit (Bradbury & Becker, 1994). A broad base of community mix keeps the ownership of the event diverse and it keeps “The management team honestly in touch with everyone’s vision for the event” (Price, 1995, p. 35). Jointly developed plans, approaches, and shared goals “enrich the impact of the festival as an agent for community cultural empowerment” (Dewhurst & MacDowell, 1995, p. 17). Such collaborative enterprises can build trust and ownership and create all kinds of meaningful relationships within a community. By developing place-rooted community themes and celebrations based on the local physical and cultural idiosyncrasies, community roots and identity can also be strengthened (Engler, 1994).

Third, establishing and marketing a public image and event identity is crucial to long-term and continued success (Reynolds, 1995). Of key importance is developing and maintaining a close working relationship with the local and regional media in order to generate favorable publicity at every opportunity (Rolley & Clements, 1994). Favorable publicity helps create a favorable image of the festival and special event in the minds of both local residents and visitors. Leadership, along with public and private partnerships, marketing strategies, and a dedicated and interested community base are tools that will strengthen community relationships and insure a festival or special event's continued success and growth.

At an extra-community level, relationships with other communities in a particular region become important, especially in terms of coordinating a variety of events and other tourism opportunities throughout that region. As an example, local leaders from several towns in the Ozark region of southwest Missouri joined forces and worked together to develop the Festival of Lights, designed to be America's largest outdoor lighting attraction during Christmas-time. In all of the localities in the region, community groups, businesses, and government get into the festive spirit by sponsoring creative lighting displays in order to celebrate the holidays and attract visitors to the region. Once visitors arrive for the Festival of Lights, they find that there are dozens of other things to see and do throughout the Ozark Mountain Country during the holidays (Bradbury & Becker, 1994).

Strengthening relationships with other organizations outside of the region are also important. A variety of agencies such as the USDA, US Soil Conservation Service, National Endowment for the Arts, Illinois Arts Council, Illinois State Department of Economic Development, and University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service may be able to contribute staff expertise and financial resources to the development of festival and special events at the local level.

Show Prospective Volunteers and Supporters the Potential Benefits

It is sometimes difficult to get a "critical mass" of local residents excited and actively involved in a festival or special event. However, if you can demonstrate the potential benefits to people as prospective volunteers and supporters there can be an enormous amount of energy and good will for projects like festivals and special events. For the visitors, a festival or special event might be "an opportunity for leisure, social or cultural experience outside the normal range of choices or beyond everyday experience" (Getz, 1991, p. 44). Visitors may be attracted to the novel experiences which festival and special events are perceived to offer. Local residents may also certainly enjoy these events as offering opportunities for new and different leisure, social or cultural experiences. In addition though, festival and special events may offer a wide variety of other benefits to local residents.

A good financial return on invested resources is a primary benefit of festival and special events that are staged as commercial ventures. However, the majority of festival and special events are organized by nonprofit or governmental entities interested in producing other benefits besides revenues. Festival and special events, as tourism, can stimulate economic growth and development by increasing opportunities for employment, improving local infrastructure and recreation facilities which local residents can utilize, generating government revenue that can be used to improve facilities, preserving historic buildings and landscapes, and conserving the cultural-rich heritage of a town or region (Bradbury & Becker, 1994). In addition to bringing in

money to the local economy, festival and special events may benefit a community by creating a positive image of place, minimizing negative impacts, contributing to sustainable development, fostering better host-visitor relations, and helping preserve sensitive natural, social, and cultural environments (Uysal, Gahan, & Martin, 1993). Festival and special events may enhance community spirit by promoting community pride, togetherness, and awareness. They may promote ethnic culture through music, arts, and crafts. Internal revenues may be generated for the festival or special event organization or external revenues may be raised for scholarships or for a variety of nonprofit organizations. Festival and special events may be used to promote agricultural products, enhance agricultural awareness, or promote the natural resources of an area and help to develop a sense of stewardship for such resources. They can provide opportunities for recreation and socialization, and provide opportunities for family togetherness, fun and entertainment for all ages (Mayfield & Crompton, 1995b). With the Festival of Lights example, “although designed as an economic development project, the festival ... produced the added benefits of enhanced community identity, increased local pride and better regional cooperation” (Bradbury & Becker, 1995, p. 5).

A Process For Facilitating Festival and Special Events

Figure 1 on the next page depicts a conceptual process for facilitating festival and special events. As a first step in this process, it is necessary to identify and involve interested residents and special interest groups that are supportive of tourism and tourism related development in the form of festivals and special events. Individuals here provide initial leadership and can influence the broader populace by demonstrating the potential benefits of festival and special events. If there is not fairly widespread interest in and support for tourism development initiative in an area or community, there is a strong probability that such efforts will not be successful. Second, with growing support, individuals and groups must have access to and be able to share information in order to make sound judgments for decision-making. As a third step, there must be a sharing of ideas among interested individuals and groups and identification of place-rooted community themes which may be developed and celebrated through festival and special events. If tourism development is to be part of a county- or region-wide economic development plan, themes must be identified for the entire county or region. The fourth step in the process is the actual planning, followed by the fifth step of action toward festival and special event development and implementation. This is followed by the actual operation of a festival and special event. But in addition, there must be an evaluation or feedback step which loops back to and continuously affects and modifies all of the previous steps in order to insure continued success and growth.

The model attempts to show this seven-step process as critically supported by relationships within a viable community network of social interaction. In other words, without strong and supportive relationships between citizens and special interest groups in the community, between special interest groups and businesses, between businesses and tourism planners and developers, between tourism planners and developers and the media, between the media and citizens, and so forth, the process of facilitating festival and special events may not be workable. Strong community relationships provide underlying support for the process to occur and for festival and special events to be successfully accomplished with potential benefits realized for the community. However, even with strong community relationships, it may be necessary for external or outside resources, in the forms of tourism planners and developers and financial support, to provide assistance in order for the facilitation of the festival and special event to be

successful.

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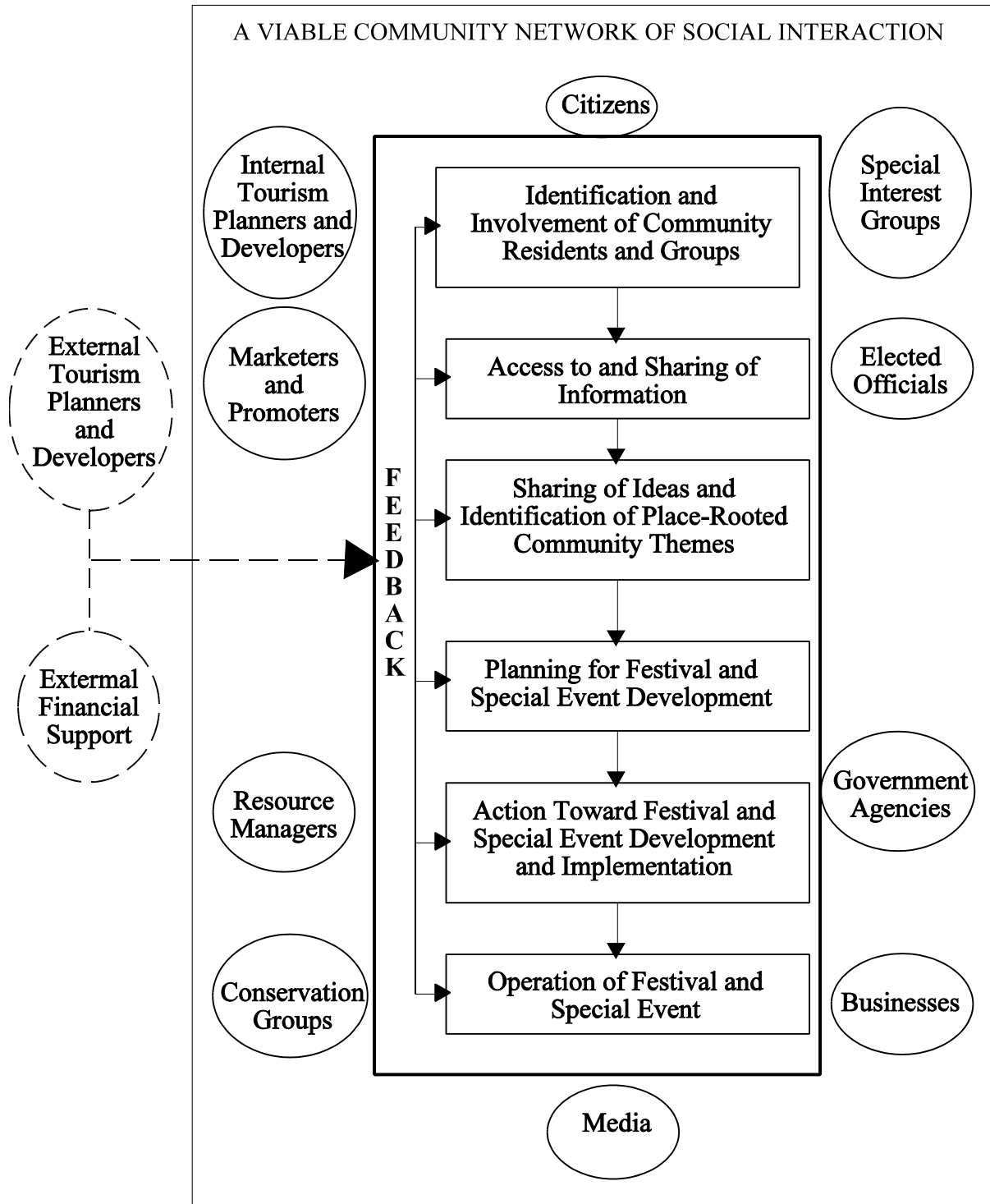


Figure 1. A Conceptual Process for Facilitating Festival and Special Events