Introduction
Most experienced Extension or community service staff know how to plan an event. However, in a time when program funds are limited, it is not enough to know how to coordinate a good event. Success is not simply measured by inviting outstanding speakers or having a large number of people to attend, but whether program objectives are met and are well documented. The only way to fully determine outcomes is to sit down and think about what you are trying to accomplish. Developing a comprehensive event plan, which includes marketing and public relations, will help to make your event an even greater success.

Getting Started
Detailed planning is critical to coordinating any event. Event chairpersons are responsible for the entire occasion from start to finish. While every event is different, here are some essential factors to consider.

#1: Establish Working Committees
A lot of time and effort goes into coordinating an event, particularly conferences. So, it’s important for you to identify experienced individuals that can help you meet this challenging task.

Finding reliable people may be difficult, but if you observe and ask around, you will find the right people for the right tasks. Make sure committee assignments are clear and that you meet with committee chairs regularly to keep your program on track. Common event planning groups may include any one of the following committees.

A planning or steering committee helps you to identify speakers, to develop the program agenda, to establish a budget, and to carry out event preparation tasks. The planning committee should be comprised of individuals within your organization, as well as external partners who are located within reasonable travel distances of your organization. An event planner, a secretary, and/or a program assistant should be a part of this committee and are ideal persons to help coordinate the event, to handle correspondence and speaker information, and to keep a detailed record of meeting minutes. An event planner, a secretary, or a program assistant can also help you to develop a timeline that outlines all event preparation activities. A timeline should tell you who is responsible for completing a task and when or if it was completed.

A marketing and public relations committee helps you to develop and to implement a marketing and public relations plan for an event that includes everything from designing promotional materials to setting up local media interviews. This committee also produces a hard copy of the event schedule or program.
complete with sponsors and speaker background information and photos, if desired.

A logistics committee makes the event run smoothly on the ground. This committee is chiefly responsible for directional signage to facilitate traffic flow and for developing emergency procedures or working with facility staff to handle on-site emergencies.

An exhibits committee identifies local, state, or national exhibitors that would enhance event activities and offer products and services that are valuable to program participants.

A registration committee makes sure promotional materials are mailed, registration forms and fees are collected, and that on-site registration for participants and speakers goes smoothly. The registration committee also makes sure participants receive certificates for professional development.

A travel committee makes arrangements to have speakers or other participants picked up and properly escorted to and from hotels and other venues.

A hospitality committee makes sure decorations, tables and chairs, food, and beverages are ordered and set up properly. This committee may also greet speakers and participants as needed.

A technology committee ensures that audiovisual equipment for presentations is available for speakers, including microphones, computers, and LCD projectors. This committee also provides technical support at the event.

A sponsorship and budget committee makes sure funds are collected and allocated for event activities. Host organizations may set up sponsorship packages that entitle sponsors to receive specific benefits such as having their logo imprinted on all event promotional pieces and free admittance to event activities. Sponsorship benefits are to be met down to the last detail.

#2: Establish Event Objectives

The planning committee can help you establish clear objectives. An event could be a critical component of your plan of work. Determine what value it adds to your community or to the lives of the people that attend. While developing event objectives, you may identify potential community-based partners. Partners could help you sponsor the event and promote it to their customers or shareholders.

Also, consider your outcomes. Are you trying to educate the public? Are you trying to change negative behavior? Are you providing the program to train other community leaders in a specific field? Remember that many professionals attend events to earn contact hours or credit toward certification. Therefore, it’s important to clearly state the purpose and the program objectives on promotional materials. In addition, decide whether you will offer contact hours or continuing education units, and complete and provide the necessary paperwork to fulfill this objective.

#3: Select a Theme

Make the title or theme of the event relevant to your objectives. Consider a theme or event title that will get people’s attention and one that is relevant to what’s taking place in your community or in society today.

#4: Define Your Target Audience

Determine who will benefit from attending your event and how you plan to reach that particular audience.

#5: Select a Date and Time

When selecting a program date, check printed and online calendars to find out what programs have been planned within Extension, on campus, or in your community. You want to avoid competing for participants. You also don’t want to get overwhelmed by trying to do too many things at the same time. You may find an opportunity to partner with another organization that has similar community outreach or program objectives.
#6: Establish a Budget
A budget is critical to any event. First, check with department or unit administrators to determine what funds they have allocated for this activity. You may start with a proposed budget then discover that it’s necessary to seek external sponsors to cover costs.

Whether it’s a fundraiser or if you are trying to avoid accumulating overhead costs, it’s wise to make sure your registration fee covers all expenses, including speaker honorariums and travel, facility costs, giveaways, food and beverages, marketing, and equipment fees.

#7: Select an Ideal Location
Make sure the location is ideal for activities and the participants, including speakers. If you invite a well-known speaker, then chances are you will need a large room or facility. You will also need to get a copy of the facility-use agreement. Some facilities may require you to sign a contract or to pay a fee. In return, find out what amenities they offer, such as:

- Is there ample parking space and do they charge a parking fee?
- Do they set up tables or chairs?
- How early can you enter the building and is there a secure room to store registration materials or other items?

It is wise to conduct a site visit along with the chairpersons of the hospitality and logistics committees to walk through the facility.

Developing a Timeline
Once committee assignments are established, it is wise to develop a timeline. A timeline is vital to your marketing and public relations plan, but it is also ideal to develop this document for all event planning activities. A timeline helps you to determine what actions are to be carried out, who is responsible for those actions, and when the tasks are to be completed.

Promoting the Event
Your marketing and public relations plan can help you to determine what messages you want to convey to participants and how to reach your audience. For example, participants are always interested in the speakers, the program agenda, costs, conference objectives, and whether they can earn professional contact hours or continuing education units. How you promote the event will depend on your target audience. Today, many forms of media are available, particularly Internet-based resources such as social networking sites.

Make sure you develop appealing promotional materials, including press releases, public service announcements, flyers, posters, and a registration brochure that includes the number of professional development hours or continuing education credits participants can earn.

Developing an Evaluation Instrument
An evaluation instrument is important in determining whether you fulfilled your objectives. It will also help you to plan and to improve your event. Evaluations are critical in measuring the overall impact or outcomes of your program. Consider asking someone with evaluation development experience to assist you.
Handling the Details
“Details” is just another word for logistics. Make sure your committees follow through on their assignments that could make or break an event, such as the following:

- Making directional signs
- Going over facility layout for traffic flow
- Picking up guests from the airport
- Printing participant and speaker name tags
- Ordering supplies, including giveaways or pre-printed event bags
- Printing certificates for speakers
- Securing contact hours or other professional or continuing education units
- Developing registration procedures
- Preparing honorariums, travel reimbursements, and thank you letters for speakers

In closing, remember that proper planning will help your event run more smoothly, and it will ensure that measurable goals are set that yield greater impacts for your organization and your community.