

Folk Festival Fundamentals: A Guide For All of Us

Are you interested in learning how to participate in one of the most successful folk festivals in the country? Is your group or organization interested in starting your own community festival or event? Here are some useful facts about that you may find helpful for your group to participate in this festival or start your own.

Why look at the ideas? This festival is focused event, each many ethnic, religious, cultural and youth



larger community that is Lowell. Many lessons can be learned from this festival.

Lowell Folk Festival for truly a community year bringing together volunteer, artistic, groups all from the

Coming Up with a Clear Focus: The Starting Point for Any Successful Festival

The preservation of the cultural riches in our community is the prime goal of the Annual Lowell Folk Festival held in downtown Lowell Massachusetts every summer. The Festival remains one of the largest free festivals in this country and its popularity continues to grow every year. Ethnic traditions such as music, dance, food and crafts from many different cultures are highlighted on a weekend in July to create an atmosphere of sharing rich traditions and cultures from many diverse backgrounds. If your organization would like to participate in this annual event here are some interesting facts and connections to assist you in your goal. This can also help to serve as a model for those who would like to plan a large scale festival of their own.

History: Learning About the Start of This Festival

The *Lowell Folk Festival* began in 1990. The *Lowell Folk Festival* we enjoy so much today evolved from local neighborhood celebrations dating back to 1974. This long history of ethnic diversity and neighborhood festivals and celebrations led to three national folk festivals were held in Lowell from 1987-1989. From these early events, the *Lowell Folk Festival* evolved into what is now one of the premier folk festivals in the United States. Now every year during the last weekend of July, Lowell is

transformed into a site for music, dancing, food and celebration. This the Annual *Lowell Folk Festival* has had its' roots firmly planted in Lowell for over fifteen years and has become a regional tradition as well as an economic success.

The Importance of Developing A Mission Statement

Whenever plans are being made to create a large scale event, it is essential that the planners develop a mission statement that will encompass the goals and keep everything on track. The mission statement of the *Lowell Folk Festival* states that the mission is "Preserving traditional culture for all to experience." The mission statement goes on to note that "The *Lowell Folk Festival* seeks to present the finest in traditional music, dance, crafts, ethnic food and the cultural treasures that make up our diverse community. The *Lowell Folk Festival* is committed to presenting these artists in a way that allows a large cross section of people to experience and share rich traditional culture."



Admission is free. Note that this mission statement is both specific and flexible. It allows for change and growth each year while the core mission remains the same. People who attend the festival know what to expect.

Planners Make the Festival Happen

The *Lowell Folk Festival* is the end product of the coming together of community leaders, organizations, volunteer groups, church groups, cultural and ethnic groups, artists, media and local, state and federal government organizations. Community leaders communicate with each other, hold forums, identify goals, develop and implement plans, target audiences, produce the event and evaluate its success. The planner themselves may change over time, but the formula for success developed over the years continues to be vital to the continued success of the *Lowell Folk Festivals*. So just how does the *Lowell Folk Festival* continue to be a success after 15 years? The community developed a plan that would remain sustainable, and this sustainability relies heavily on communication among all involved parties, the use of community resources and the pledge to maintain the traditional arts. Local neighborhoods met in a forum with city and event planners to determine what impact the festival was likely to have, how citizens and groups could participate and which components of their culture they hoped to showcase.

A Secret to Success? Seeking Out Civic Resources

A key feature of the *Lowell Folk Festival* is the extent to which it draws on the strengths of many different groups. Many organizations participate in different ways: some supply building materials, others provide crews to build staging and electricians for wiring sound systems, some supply finances to fund printing of flyers, beverage and food concessions, others assist with transportation of large groups, traffic control and still others help with installation and maintained of sanitary facilities and first aid.

Who participates? Civic resource participants include:

- *Lowell Festival Foundation*
- *Lowell National Historic Park*
- *The University of Massachusetts Lowell*
- *Middlesex Community College*
- *The City of Lowell*
- *Massachusetts Government*
- *National Council of the Traditional Arts*
- *Lowell Parks and Recreation Departments*
- *Lowell Police and Public Works Departments*
- *Lowell Regional Transit Authority*
- *Greater Merrimack Valley Transit Authority*
- *SMMC and Lowell General Hospitals*

Community Resources: This Festival Could Not Happen Within Them and Neither Can Your Festival!

When one thinks of a community's resources, the cultural, arts, and musical groups perhaps first come to mind. Investing in this type of resource is important to refining the quality of the event, but they should not be viewed as the only cultural resource. Don't overlook community and ethnic groups, faith organization, youth and volunteer groups, neighborhoods and local businesses. These groups can contribute volunteer resources, items for concessions and most important, talent.

Some community resources to consider include:

- *Volunteer Groups*
- *Churches and religious organizations*
- *Charitable Foundations*
- *Historic Preservation Societies*
- *Youth Groups*
- *Elementary and Secondary Schools*
- *Local Craftspersons*

- *Local Artists*
- *Local Businesses*
- *Rotary Club, Kiwanis, Chamber of Commerce*
- *Cultural Organizations*
- *Social Service Organizations*
- *Local media, newspapers, radio, television*

Best Practices

The combined efforts of all involved organizations developed their strategies for best practices. “Since we got it right last year,” said organizer Susan Leggat, “there are not going to be a lot of changes” (www.lowellsun.com/cda/article).

Cooperation between the Lowell Festival Foundation and local business results in a parade route which would include more exposure to the public.” As far as physical changes, we may expand the parade route to please some business owners outside the traditional routes, said Leggat, “Go around town a little bit farther.”

(www.lowellsun.com/cda/article).



Innovations, Best Practices and Research

One of the hallmarks of the *Lowell Folk Festival* is that new ideas are brought by participating partners and the *Lowell Folk Festival* becomes a test ground and area for pioneering new technology and inventive ideas. For example, prototype biodegradable eating utensils made of cornstarch were tested to reduce the amount of waste the Lowell Sanitation Department would need to remove and drink containers were recycled in a pilot recycling effort so successfully that it will be permanently implemented. Ted David, Parks Department said “the biodegradables from last year were taken to a facility in Ipswich and composted, and will be spread in the beds around Boarding House Park in about three weeks”

(www.lowellsun.com/cda/article). All examples of best practices that involved local business, municipal departments, environmentalists, and festival planners in innovation, problem solving strategies and sustainability of programs.

Research regarding the socio-demographics of the participating ethnic, cultural and artistic profile of the typical festival fan assisted Folk Festival developers in maintaining the folk traditions, themes and free admission. “Our charge is to represent what’s here

in Lowell, and what's not here in Lowell," said Chris Williams of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, which books and stages the showcased performers at the festival" (www.lowellsun.com/cda/article).

The Importance of Corporate Partners

Partnerships formed between large corporations from the local community to provide financial support, services, a sense of corporate "good will" in their local neighborhoods, and increased advertising exposure for public relations, product and the Folk Festival. "The Verizon Foundation and the Kiwanis Club of Greater Lowell have sponsored the 16 year run of the event.



Heritage Farm Ice Cream had partnered by selling ice cream at the Festival and returning the profit to the event. MassBank is a Festival Partner who sends our information to all of their customers with the June statements.....DoubleTree Hotel in downtown Lowell is the Official Host Hotel and Coca-Cola is the official soft drink." (www.lowellsun.com/cda/article). The local festival's high profile offers marketing

opportunities greater exposure by partnering with the event. "Arts and culture constitute an industry in and of themselves. In addition to performing art venues, museums and historic districts attract paying consumers interested in learning about the culture or history that is being shared. Local government's cultural resources departments or arts commissions can promote arts endeavors by packaging and promoting their cultural resources together." (Singer 2000).

Case Study Lowell Massachusetts (Singer 2000).

The "National Park Service has been a loyal friend to Lowell. Much of the city's downtown is part of the Lowell National Historic Park, which includes old textile-mill buildings and affiliated industrial structures. The National Park Service (NPS) has been a visible and vocal advocate in rebuilding Lowell and preserving its industrial history. It has rehabilitated several mill facilities that now contain offices and museums, developed green spaces and in the downtown, and now operates a turn-of-the-century replica trolley system that carries visitors among historic sites. NPS conducts cultural events celebrating historic and modern Lowell. The National Folk Festival was one such effort, held on city streets from 1987 to 1989 to revive the flagging city economically. The festival featured nationally recognized and

local art of traditional music and dance. It also involves nonperformance venues that featured oral histories of local culture, regional foodways, games and play. The festival was contracted to stay in Lowell for three years, but community support for the event was so widespread that the city and the park service established the Lowell Folk Festival, annually drawing crowds in excess of 100,000 people." (Singer 2000).

Volunteers: Your Most Important Resource

Local groups, volunteers and residents are key assets as the festival. Community volunteers work together toward the common goal of creating a vibrant downtown festival. Volunteer opportunities abound at the *Lowell Folk Festival*. By fostering community participation, individuals contribute to improving the festival.

Funding: Finding It

Funding resources include local chambers of commerce, businesses, corporations and government both local and national. State agencies, community development departments and grants are sources of information on how your group may participate in the largest free folk arts festival in the country.

Handy Links and Organizations

Lowell Festival Foundation

Executive Director
Lowell Festival Foundation
PO Box 217
Lowell, MA 01853
Phone: 978-275-1764
Fax: 978-275-1762
<http://www.nps.gov>

Lowell Festival Foundation

World Wide Headquarters
Lowell National Historical Park
67 Kirk Street
Lowell, MA 01852
<http://www.110.net/~ps3923/>
<http://www.lowellfolkfestival.org>
<http://www.nps.gov/lowe>

National Council for the Traditional Arts

<http://www.ncta.net/lowell>

The City of Lowell

<http://web.ci.lowell.ma.us/culturalarts>.

<http://www.lowellcentercity.org>

The National Folk Festival

<http://www.nationalfolkfestival.com>

The Lowell Sun

<http://www/lowellsun.com>

The University of Massachusetts Lowell

<http://www.uml.edu>

Massachusetts Cultural Council

Lowell Cultural Council

PO Box 8686

Lowell, MA 01853

Phone: 978-453-2310

<http://www.mass-culture.org/lcc>

New England Foundation for the Arts

<http://www.nefa.org>