

PARKING APALOOZA





SHUTTERSTOCK, THINKSTOCK

Understanding best practices for big events can help guarantee success.

By Debbie Hoffmann

What is the key to successfully managing large events on a college campus? Planning, planning, and planning. Texas A&M University was rated in the 2011 preseason edition of *Sports Illustrated* as the top college football game day environment, with Fox Sports chiming in by listing the school's Kyle Field as one of the nation's 10 best college football stadiums.

College parking operators truly have the ability to affect the mark left on event attendees. Texas A&M hosted a home football game day with more than 22,000 cars and 10,000 bus passengers and created a rule book anyone can follow to help avoid pitfalls and the consequences and fallout that follow them.

Critical components for successful event management include:

- Planning and cooperation.
- Communication.
- Maximizing available resources.
- Employing pricing strategies to manage demand and offset costs.
- Ensuring a safe venue by coordinating traffic flow, enforcement, and pedestrian and vehicular movement.

Before getting into the details of these concepts, it is important to recognize that each campus is unique in space, venues, cooperation, and access. What works at one university may need to be modified to be successful at another.

Let's talk events. Parking operations on campuses own varying degrees of event management. Often there are other departments that are the true hosts, such as athletics on game days. Working with the staff from the host department to ensure a coordinated effort, comprehensive plan, open communication, and cooperation is essential to success. On event days, we share the same customer and the same goals as the host: a safe and fun event where pitfalls are avoided.



Regardless of the size of the event, the first step is to get all the players around the table to develop the plan, get input, and assign duties. A comprehensive plan considers all customer groups and all aspects of getting them to the event, through the event, and away from campus when it's over.

Planning and Cooperation

There is always more than one customer group whose needs should be considered when planning an event. Certainly there are the people coming to participate in the event, but even within this group, there are diverse needs such as VIPs, disabled guests, and those arriving by a means other than a personal vehicle, such as by bus, bike, taxi, or on foot. Another group includes the employees working the event who have a variety of duties that likely will require them to arrive early and leave late. This group includes those managing the event, custodians maintaining the facilities and grounds, food service workers providing catering or other dining services, traffic directors, parking lot attendants, security, and the stars of the show, including athletes, performers, speakers, or dignitaries. The best way to ensure that each group's needs are met is to ask for cooperation from them.

Finally, there are other people with no affiliation to the event who will need access to campus (some people may be studying or conducting research) and those who

may be displaced to make room for those coming to the event. Remember to communicate street and parking lot closures to the campus community and explain alternate routes and parking locations available to them.

Communication

Communication about an event should be multifaceted and targeted to help ensure that the correct messages reach the appropriate groups. Emails, websites, maps, signage, radio, paid advertisements, public service announcements, and social media are all tools to help get the word out about multiple aspects of the event plan. The communication should include options for getting to campus on the day of the event, and we must not forget to tell customers what to expect during and after the event. It is our role to help get them away from campus safely and efficiently by creating, managing, and communicating traffic, transit, and pedestrian plans.

Once the plans are set, consider developing an operations manual that can be given to each member of your team who will be working the event and to appropriate administrators who will be quizzed about the event or whose buy-in you need for the event plan. The manual might contain:

- Operational expectations and requirements.
- Frequently asked questions about the operational plan or by customers.



- Maps of the event area that include parking, toilet locations, accessible routes, pedestrian access, VIP access, first aid, concessions, lost and found, and bus access.
- Set-up instructions for workers.
- Pictures of the types of credentials workers may see and the access they convey.
- Miscellaneous information, such as a VIP list with pictures and rules related to the event, including when the doors open and what items are permitted to be taken into the venue.

There are other groups who should not be forgotten during the communication phase, including the marketing team, the customer service unit(s) who will be answering questions from customers, and local radio and television stations. All workers who needed the internal operation plan also need to be coached about how to communicate to guests coming to the event.

Maximizing Available Resources

It is not unusual for the components of event management to quickly become overwhelming. We must work together with other appropriate units on campus and in the community to maximize resources and call in reinforcements when necessary. Transportation-related resources to consider when managing large on-campus events include staffing, equipment, parking, and transit.

Every event must be staffed with an adequate number of transportation administrators to oversee the operation. People with experience and knowledge are able to spot anomalies or backlogs and proactively address and stave them. Run the operation using both budgeted and student employees who are properly coached and trained about the event details. Their experience with parking and transit operations plus their familiarity with the campus layout will serve you well. If additional staff is needed, consider temporary staff or contracted event staff to assist in areas where oversight is necessary, but familiarity with the entire event plan is not as critical. Finally, decision-making members from each of the critical departments involved in hosting the event should come together to oversee the operation from a command center where significant issues can be addressed and quickly resolved, and where information can be disseminated to front line staff.

Equipment does the talking without the need for continuous staff oversight. Barricades, signs, ropes, and cones direct customers without using staff resources during the peak time of the event. If needed, rent additional equipment or consider contracting a traffic maintenance company to supply and install traffic management devices, which serve several purposes:

- Get people to desired or authorized locations.
- Help guests recognize the route back to their bus

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stop or space where they parked.

- Keep customers away from unauthorized areas.
- Get traffic flowing in the desired direction and to desired destinations.
- Convey rules or regulations.
- Communicate when an area is sold out and provide the location of the next available area.

Other items that fall into the equipment category include shirts or uniforms, reflective vests, food and drinks, umbrellas, sunscreen, tents, radios, night lights, golf carts, porta-potties, and dump stations or trucks if there will be a recreational vehicle component to your event.

When planning transit service, consider getting people both to and from the event. Anticipate pre- and post-event traffic congestion, and plan routes away from those areas. The hours of operation and park-and-ride options should be tailored to manage both parking and traffic demand. Extending bus service hours to transport employees to and from the venue may be a worthwhile trade-off if getting their vehicles offsite will help ensure adequate parking for those attending the event. Rarely do facilities have enough accessible parking to meet the demand of large-scale events. Consider creating a disabled parking area away from the event, complete with shuttle service. This will aid guests with mobility impairments by shortening the distances they must walk.

Using Pricing Strategies

Pricing strategies can be used to manage traffic and parking demand while offsetting costs. Season passes for sporting or theater events can be presold to limit the amount of money being handled on the day of the event, and those who don't show up should help you gain 10 to 16 percent in additional revenue when you re-sell the unused spaces to pay-on-arrival guests. Providing reserved VIP and donor parking areas may be desirable to the event host and can be done for a premium price. Parking for tailgating, vehicles with trailers, RVs, and party buses is particularly popular during sporting events. Planning for, establishing, and marketing specialty areas can help meet the expectations of guests coming to the event, keep these unique vehicles out of other parking areas, and command a higher price-per-space to add to your revenue.


Prepaid and pay-on-arrival parking facilities should be priced by proximity to the event venue; pricing and rules can help push customers to the desired choice to manage

traffic and parking demand. Online, prepaid season parking can be offered for a small discount and requires your staff to handle only one payment. Prepaid parking for an individual event can be offered at the same price as pay-on-arrival, but guarantees a space. Because payment is made online, it is more convenient for the customer and means less cash handling for your team on the day of the event.

Safety

The safety of all customers outranks convenience as a goal and is integral to a great experience for everyone. During the planning process, always defer to the expertise and experience of law enforcement, fire and rescue, and emergency medical staff to plan for routine events and contingencies. Actively engage traffic direction and event staff so each accepts their responsibility for their role in making the event as safe as possible. Safety plans should consider:

- Community traffic.
- On-campus vehicular movement.
- Pedestrians.
- Enforcement.
- Keeping vehicles out of unwanted areas.
- Maintaining areas for designated patrons.
- Response teams and equipment.
- Fire extinguishers and water pump trucks.
- First aid supplies.
- Seasonal issues that may produce hazards.

Even after event plans have been made and executed, it is still not yet time to rest on our laurels. Quickly after the event, bring the planning team back together for an after-action meeting to review what worked well and where there is room for improvement. Even if the event is not recurring, there is value in learning and recording successes and failures so they can be used to shape planning for the future. It is easy and important to focus on the operational rules and policies that helped the event go well, however, the ultimate goal in event management is a positive customer experience. Remember to gather feedback from participants about the friendliness of staff, a welcoming environment, services and amenities provided, and whether their expectations were met or exceeded. Try to find a balance that allows guests to have fun within the boundaries of the rules necessary for safety and maintaining crowd control. Don't lose sight of providing great service and limiting restrictions to what is necessary so the first and lasting impression makes them want to return again and again. 



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