

The **Ins & Outs** of **Event Planning**

Jennifer Jett

As a meeting planner, you've scored the contract for the big event—that Nashville sensation is coming to perform in your town, that national sports team is coming to play at your venue or that world-renowned motivational speaker wants to hold a meeting in your local conference space.

Contracting to bring a national or international event such as these—or, in West Virginia's case, the PGA TOUR or World's Strongest Man competition—is one challenge, but planning an event of this magnitude is another challenge entirely. Successfully orchestrating an event like this requires open communication across the board in the tourism industry as well as with city officials. You also must have on your staff facilitators who have impeccable attention to detail and planners who can formulate a contingency plan for the worst case scenario and can be ready for anything to happen at the last minute.

Here, The Greenbrier shares with us how they planned the PGA TOUR's Greenbrier Classic in less than a year, and the Charleston CVB shows us how they managed to bring three international events to the Capital City in a 12-month period. From these meeting planning professionals, we learn the ins and outs of organizing a successful national event in West Virginia, from the importance of a knowledgeable staff and passionate volunteers to deadlines and preparation.

Making the Impossible Possible *Tim McNeely*

Most PGA TOUR events are planned years in advance by scores of golf tournament professionals. For the inaugural Greenbrier Classic, we had less than a year to create the biggest sporting event in state history. When Greenbrier owner Jim Justice announced The Greenbrier Classic in August 2009, he also set a formidable goal. He wanted The Greenbrier Classic to be the best event on the TOUR. The classic surpassed expectations and was a huge success for one reason: our people.

The tournament team started to form in September and was completely in place by February. Our team consisted of a director, an assistant director, a coordinator, a director of sponsorship sales, an operations manager and a volunteer coordinator. Most of us had held similar positions for other events; however, the development of a new event of this magnitude was certainly a challenge. The PGA TOUR staff was a valuable resource along the way through our face-to-face meetings, phone calls and the volumes of best practices they provided.

Transportation was one of our biggest challenges as we were anticipating crowds of up to 50,000 each day, which is considerably more than the population of the entire county. We worked with local leaders and law enforcement, as well as a transportation consultant for other TOUR events, to create our plan. Through a partnership with the State Fair of West Virginia, whose home is in the neighboring town of Lewisburg,

we were able to use their parking area and a fleet of 90 motorcoaches to bring spectators to the resort. Also, with the City of White Sulphur Springs, we arranged for local residents who were volunteers or spectators to park in town and take a shuttle to the arrival area. To capitalize on this captive audience, we showed videos of the resort, county and state on all of the motorcoaches.

One of the greatest assets we had for this inaugural event was the resort's staff. The Greenbrier is highly regarded in the hospitality industry for its team of professionals, and together they produce thousands of conferences, special activities and dining events each year. Jeff Kmiec, the resort's vice president and managing director, had worked with TOUR events for seven years prior to joining The Greenbrier. In addition, Jeremy Critchfield, the vice president of food and beverage and corporate chef, as well as a few other members of The Greenbrier team, had prior experience with PGATOUR events. All of this was a tremendous advantage as we planned transportation, meals and activities for the TOUR players, their families, the media, event sponsors and spectators.

Dining operations to serve the players and their families, volunteers and spectators was another challenge we faced. We wanted to create a true Greenbrier culinary experience, and one of the ways we accomplished that by utilizing tomatoes from The Greenbrier farm for the 15,000 fried green tomato sandwiches served during the event. We also converted the lower level of The Greenbrier Golf Club into a private dining area for the players and their families, taking advantage of the facility's upper level kitchen and the close proximity to the 1st and 18th holes of The Old White course.



West Virginia Coal Festival

Event Date: **June 14-18, 2011**
Year of Inaugural Event: **1992**
Average attendance: **8,000-10,000**

As the state's leading coal-producing county 12 years in a row, it is only natural that Boone County would be the home of the West Virginia Coal Festival. Boone County employs more than 4,000 miners with Massey Energy, Hobet Mining, Patriot Coal and Coal River Energy as the major employers. Coal was first discovered in Boone County in 1742, and the Boone County development authority organized the festival 17 years ago as a tribute to the coal industry and its heritage. The festival helps keep our rich coal heritage alive and gives the local merchants and economy a boost during the third week of June each year. The festival's many activities include: coal mine equipment displays (over \$15 million in machinery displayed in 2010), Nashville entertainers, a fallen miners' memorial service, a carnival, fireworks, a downtown coal museum, pageants, arts and cultural activities, food vendors and a parade.

All TOUR events are dependent on volunteers, and certainly our volunteers were a vital key to our success. Within the first week, we had more than 700 volunteers register, and in the end, we had more than 2,200 volunteers from 23 states. We held volunteer orientation and training sessions at The Greenbrier



Pickin' in the Panhandle

Event Date: **Sept. 9-11, 2011**
Year of Inaugural Event: **2007**
Average attendance: **8,000-10,000**

Pickin' in the Panhandle, the West Virginia State BBQ & Bluegrass Festival, is a three-day event held every year to commemorate the best in BBQ, bluegrass and family fun in beautiful Back Creek Valley, WV. An hour from Washington, D.C., the fifth annual installment will take place September 9-11, 2011. More than 8,000 BBQ and bluegrass fans will come to the Eastern Panhandle to watch headliners like Ricky Skaggs and the Charlie Daniels Band while enjoying world-class BBQ.

The festival offers the Kansas City Barbeque Society West Virginia State BBQ Championship as well as a backyard BBQ cook-off. Cook-off competitors come from all over the Northeast to participate while the bluegrass music competitions attract aspiring musicians from across the region. In 2011, Pickin' will add music workshops and a Tastin' Tent for the BBQ competition.

With something for everyone in a picturesque mountain setting, Pickin' in the Panhandle offers the best in bluegrass music partnered with delicious BBQ and Appalachian heritage.



and in Charleston, which outlined their committee responsibilities as well as The Greenbrier's service standards. Throughout the classic, our volunteers performed above and beyond, making a positive impression on the TOUR, the players and their families and the spectators.

Like the TOUR, The Greenbrier is committed to being a steward of the

community and supporting charitable endeavors. Thanks to the strong support of our many sponsors, the classic was able to provide more than \$3 million in charitable giving, a new record for a first-year PGATOUR event. Our sponsors provided more than just financial support, though. Each organization was truly engaged and with their resources contributed greatly to our success.

The mantra of the PGATOUR's charitable initiative is "Together, anything's possible," and The Greenbrier Classic is the epitome of that ideal. Because the classic was a true team operation with unwavering dedication from the tournament team, resort staff, volunteers and sponsors, we achieved Mr. Justice's goal. Every group was critical to our success, and together we made the impossible possible.



The Keys to Success

Patricia Bradley-Pitolo

Since 2008, the Charleston Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) has hosted 202,000 attendees at 207 conventions and events with an economic impact of \$80.5 million for the City of Charleston. Some were as small as 20 attendees, whereas 58 saw more than 1,000 attendees. Thirty of these were national events and three were international events.

If you ask community leaders what the CVB has hosted in Charleston, they are most likely to mention World's Strongest Man, The International Chili Cook-off or Bishop T.D. Jakes' visit. It is the prestige of bringing these international events to Charleston that makes them so welcomed by the community and makes Charleston increasingly recognized by national meeting planners as the place to bring their next convention or event.

It isn't enough to attract national or international conventions and events to Charleston, though. Our reputation is built upon exceeding the expectations of the planners and the attendees, and that is something that we cannot do without extraordinary planning and the strong support of our entire community.

How long does it take to plan for national or international conventions or events? That depends entirely on each particular event. Charleston was able to host World's Strongest Man in 2008 for two reasons. First, Egypt backed out as host six months before the event. Second, Governor Joe Manchin volunteered West Virginia as host and Charleston Mayor Danny Jones volunteered Charleston as the host city. The International Chili Cookoff had regularly been held in Las Vegas. Charleston CVB Sales Manager Jennifer Brown flew International Chili Society Executive Director Carol Hancock into Charleston for a site visit and convinced her to move the competition east of the Mississippi for the first time in their 42-year history. After several discussions with The Potter's House

staff, CVB Sales Manager Todd Morris won approval for Bishop T.D. Jakes to hold a conference in Charleston.

Ideally, we would have had an entire year to plan each of these events. However, circumstances were such that we had only four months to plan for each of them.

Planning national and international events depends entirely on each particular convention or event. The CVB contract with the producers of World's Strongest Man was extremely detailed, down to providing 70 pounds of bananas per day that could not have any green on the skin. While our CVB director of services, Dee Bird, is very talented, we immediately recognized that she could not possibly take care of the 27 conventions and events the CVB was hosting during this four-month period and also handle the hundreds of details for World's Strongest Man. Wisely, we hired Jim Buckalew, University of Charleston crew coach and former athletic director, as the CVB event coordinator.

The International Chili Society (ICS) guidelines required that a local organizing committee (LOC) serve as event coordinator. This group was selected by the ICS, and the role of the CVB was to assist this committee. The Manahan Group served as the CVB representative on the LOC.

The Potter's House organizes Bishop T.D. Jakes' meetings all over the world. They knew exactly what needed to be done and when that task needed to be completed. Our staff worked more as assistants to The Potter's House than as coordinators. Additionally, we hired National Travel to handle all the housing, travel and tour arrangements.

If I am making these three events sound easy, I'm wrong. While the Charleston CVB hired additional help, Bird and our staff, with the help of the CVB Ambassadors, a convention and event volunteer group, put in thousands of hours planning and hosting these events as well as the other 204 conventions and events.

Overcoming unexpected problems comes down to planning everything to the smallest detail and getting as much as possible done ahead of time so that when something unravels, we have time to deal with that specific problem. More than time, however, real problems can only be overcome if you have a strong support group. Our support group includes Mayor Danny Jones, the Charleston City Council and all of the city departments, as well as our community leaders, city venues and citizens. Also, CVB Sports Sales Manager Samantha Carney is better at tapping into this community support than anyone I know. Whatever it takes to solve a problem, the CVB is blessed with supporters to help.

Pulling off a successful national or international event comes down to this: extraordinary planning and a very strong support group. EMSP



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