

CASE STUDY

EVOLUTION IN EVENT MANAGEMENT: THE GOLD COAST'S WINTERSUN FESTIVAL

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Event management is an emerging field of research and education, paralleling the growth in events themselves as part of the tourism industry. The events industry has been keen that employees receive more formal management training. This raises the question of what makes event management different from any other form of management? Most event management texts appear to cover the basic management skill areas of marketing, finance, human resource management, and coordination. There are two areas where event management may differ from management in general: 1) Events have a unique and all-consuming climax, which is not typical of other management areas, and 2) Most events are a form of entertainment and therefore require staging. In addition, most events involve an element of risk—things can occur that are outside of management control. This type of risk is not unique to events, but it is brought into sharper focus in event management because the event manager has only one chance to manage the risk. This article uses an event management case study in the form of the Gold Coast (Australia) Wintersun Festival to illustrate how management of an event has evolved from being almost nonexistent in the 1980s, to a low-key but sophisticated approach involving strategy, marketing, stakeholder involvement, and innovation. It also discusses the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Key words: Event management; Festival management strategy; Innovation in festivals

The Wintersun Festival is held every June at Coolangatta/Tweed Heads, a popular twin-towns sea-side location on the border between the Australian States of Queensland and New South Wales. The region is at the southern end of Australia's Gold Coast, one of the nation's most popular holiday destinations. Despite its better surf breaks, the southern end of the Gold Coast

is something of a poor second cousin to the northern end. The headquarters of local government is at the northern end, as is the large casino, major hotels, and high-rise towers.

The Festival is a nostalgia festival that celebrates the music, cars, clothes, and dances of the period from 1955 to 1970, and as such has appeal to Australia's baby

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boomers who were teenagers at that time. It is a mixture of free and ticketed entertainment, which runs for a week but culminates in 2 days of free daytime entertainment in the major streets.

The event began its life in 1973 as a community festival featuring billy carts and an aquatic carnival on the Tweed River. In 1988 the local business community sought to make the event more tourism focused. They brought in a Festival Director with a brief to come up with a concept that would be attractive to visitors. The aim was to increase occupancy in accommodation houses in the Coolangatta/Tweed Heads area in winter, which is typically a low occupancy time on the southern end of the Gold Coast.

Coolangatta had some historical association with baby boomers, having been a popular honeymoon destination in the 1960s. It had also been a place where rock and roll bands from Sydney and Brisbane had visited and performed.

The Wintersun Director persuaded the Festival Committee to use the nostalgia of baby boomers for Coolangatta and came up with the idea of a rock and roll festival. The June long weekend was chosen to attract visitors from southern states who would find the winter sunshine attractive.

This article traces the historical development of the Wintersun Festival and how the management of the event has changed over time. It also looks at the way management copes with an open festival where there is almost no limit to the number of stakeholders and commercial interests seeking to use the event to further their own goals. The article is based on structured interviews with the Festival Director, and with other stakeholders.

Brief History of the Event

In its initial year (1988) of operation as a rock and roll festival, Wintersun used the back of a truck as a stage upon which three bands performed. The truck was parked in Marine Parade, Coolangatta, which is on the esplanade, was free to enter, and artists were paid out of sponsorship money. The crowd was around 500–600 people.

In 1989, the Festival's second year, it was rebranded as a nostalgia festival instead of a rock and roll festival. Part of the street was closed to traffic so that dancers could use the area in front of the stage/truck for a dance floor, and restored cars were introduced to showcase the cars of the era. This marked the beginning of a de-

liberate strategy to add features to the Festival to appeal to a wider audience than rock and roll aficionados.

By the mid-1990s, the event had grown to the point where there were two stages set up at each end of the esplanade, which was closed to traffic for 2 days. In addition, the next street back from the beach was closed on Sunday and an additional stage was set up. The crowd had clearly increased, though no estimate was available until 1998 when a Griffith University team conducted a survey of the event and estimated a crowd of 10,000 using aerial photographs (Fredline, Mules, Raybould, & Tomljenovic, 1998).

The event continued to be free, with no fences or gates, and no tickets. Various ticketed events had begun to orbit as satellites to the main feature/highlight, which was the 2 days (Saturday and Sunday) of free street entertainment with rock and roll bands playing until late afternoon.

There were now (1998) three stages operating, and a street parade had been introduced along with various other activities:

1. a fun run,
2. a Malibu surfboard riding competition,
3. scenic helicopter rides with proceeds going to a children's charity,
4. craft and produce market,
5. carnival rides,
6. a rock and roll dance competition,
7. display and judging of restoration of classic cars,
8. nighttime, ticketed rock and roll shows organized at clubs and hotels in the area,
9. a ticketed Monday concert at the Kirra Sports Ground, featuring artists who had already made an appearance sometime during the now week-long event.

The aquatic carnival had been a big financial drain on the Festival and it was discontinued from 1998. By 2003 there were four stages operating across two streets, both of which were closed to traffic for the Saturday and Sunday of the long weekend. Some 550–600 restored classic cars took part. The organization of the event had become more hierarchical in that aspects such as the surfboard riding competition, the dance competition, the street entertainment, and the street parade were all delegated to subcommittees, which reported to a board. The Festival was now incorporated as a cor-

porate association. The crowd had grown to an estimated 30,000.

Vision and Mission

The articulation of a vision and mission is a core element of strategic management (Viljoen & Dann, 2000), yet it does not seem to feature in event management texts. The process by which an organization's mission is articulated, reviewed, and specified forces the individuals engaged to turn their attention away from their specialist area and to focus on where the organization as a whole is going.

The vision and mission of the Wintersun Festival clearly took a major turn in 1988 when it changed from being a celebration of community to a tourism attraction. However, in talking to the Festival Director, one gets the impression that he hates to discard anything, and that he would still envisage the local community as receiving benefits from some parts of the program, while other parts of the program would be more appealing to visitors.

The tourism focus was initially to attract people to the area and to increase occupancy in local accommodation houses. This mission could be seen as being economic in that the aim was to boost local profits and incomes in the accommodation and hospitality sectors. By the early 1990s the emphasis had changed slightly from the narrow focus on occupancy to one of promotion of the region. The Festival was now seen as the largest single piece of promotion of the Coolangatta area and was part of the Main Street program of town center renewal. There is an irony in the use of a nostalgia festival for the purpose of urban renewal.

The mission altered again in the late 1990s to "not necessarily increasing the number of attendees, but increasing their length of stay" (from interview with Festival Director, July 2003). This marked a return, or a repositioning, of economic factors in the mission. By this time the hospitality sector in Coolangatta/Tweed was operating close to capacity for the final weekend of the Festival, and so the only way to generate more business for the sector was to increase demand at other times of the Festival week. The strategy used to achieve this goal is discussed below.

In interview, the Festival Director stated that he believed that word of mouth would ensure that the number of attendees kept increasing, due to the uniqueness

and mix of the Festival, and that this would occur "naturally" (i.e., without any deliberate strategy).

However, he stated that he would like to see the Festival become more of a week-long event, with a grand opening and closing feature to encourage people to take a week-long holiday in the region.

Management Structure, Budget, and Staffing

The total income for the 2003 Festival was A\$330,000, which yielded a "small surplus" after expenses. The salary of the festival Director is met out of Main Street program funding and funding from the Gold Coast City Council, which also contributes some \$30,000 cash to the event, in addition to substantial in-kind support.

There is no other paid staff, with all of the functions of marketing, finance, administration, and staging being handled by volunteers under the supervision of the Director. The same person has been Director since 1988, and has built up a team of volunteers who have the commitment and skill to enable the event to succeed on such a small budget.

Following incorporation in 1988, a Board of Directors was appointed that included the Director. There are a number of committees that are responsible for Festival features such as the bands, the dance competition, the cars, the street parade, the Malibu competition, and so on. Each committee is staffed by volunteers who have a strong interest in that particular facet of the Festival. The Director and one other board member sit on each committee.

The fact that the same person has been Festival Director for 15 years is both a strength and a weakness. In addition to accumulating knowledge on event organization, the Director has built up strong personal contacts with key people in local government, the business community in the area, and the entertainment and nostalgia community. The latter includes the numerous dance clubs and car clubs that are important to the Festival's success.

The ability to work with people from a wide variety of backgrounds is an important attribute of a Festival Director, and in dealing with passionate vested interest groups the ability to remain cool under fire is important. The Chairman of the Festival Board said in interview that he had never see the Festival Director lose patience or get angry with any of the many stakeholders with whom they collaborated.

The Director's personal attributes in the job may be summed up by the interview quote "I am not a rock and roller, and I don't drive a hot rod, my passion is organizing events." He stated that he believes that events sometimes do not achieve their potential because the passion of the director/manager results in too specialized a program. His philosophy is to keep adding elements to Wintersun that may surprise past patrons and delight new ones. At the same time he strives to "keep what we've got" by acting to refresh any feature of the event that begins to lose appeal to patrons.

It is clear that this individual is very important to the event. Being the only paid employee surrounded by volunteers, he does not have a deputy or heir apparent. He personally carries out tasks that would be delegated to staff in larger organizations, and has a "hands-on" involvement in every facet of the event. This concentration of microlevel management in the hands of one individual would seem to make the event highly vulnerable because of its dependence on his continued commitment.

Marketing and Strategy

The Festival receives sponsorship from print and electronic media in the form of advertising time, and the media companies value the time and space at full commercial rates as a measure of the monetary value of their sponsorship. The advertising is promulgated in the companies' markets up and down Australia's east coast, but without access to expensive media monitoring the Festival organizers have no way of knowing if the advertising occurs, or if it is effective.

This haphazard nature of the advertising campaign is due to the Festival's small budget and has forced the organizers to resort to less commercial forms of marketing and promotion. The Director stated that he believed that word of mouth was the most powerful and effective advertising for the event. He believes that for the most part Festival patrons will speak about the event positively with their friends and family: "People come with an expectation, and they have to go away thinking that it was better than expected so that they will come back, and will recommend it to their friends" (interview with Festival Director, September 2003).

Word-of-mouth advertising is supplemented with a mail-out to people whose postal address is recorded on a customer database numbering some 5000 people. These include people who are members of rock and

roll clubs and car clubs. The clubs promote the event amongst their members and are an important source of its nostalgia flavor and ambience.

In addition, brochures are placed in the general tourism market by the Gold Coast Tourism Bureau. Local press advertising and street banners occur only in the lead-up week prior to the Festival, with posters and banners in the area of the event being as much about generating atmosphere as about promoting the event to potential patrons.

As noted above, major strategic changes have occurred with the move from a community festival to a rock and roll festival in 1988, and to a nostalgia festival in 1989. Within that broad theme, the objectives have changed from building the crowd size to having people arrive earlier in the week and stay longer in the area. The latter is achieved by providing good-quality entertainment at the start of the Festival week.

In the past few years the Board and the Director have refined this objective even further. The Director stated that he wanted to make it into more of an international event and attract holiday-makers from North America and Europe. The music in particular had appeal in those markets where similar events were successful. As a strategy in this direction, he was attempting to accumulate a fund that could be used to bring an international rock and roll act to Australia once every 5 years. He believed that once Wintersun had attracted "a few hundred" North American visitors, the word-of-mouth effect would quickly see this grow into several hundred.

The objective behind the internationalization strategy is an economic one. "The further away people come, the longer they are likely to stay and the more places they are likely to visit" (interview with Wintersun Director, September 2003). He also believed that such visitors were more likely to buy souvenir T-shirts and other merchandise, and were more likely to attend ticketed events than patrons who drove down from Brisbane for the day. He believed that the latter were likely to cause parking space to be used up and not spend very much.

It may be true that one visitor from North America may equate to 10 from Brisbane, in terms of spend in the local economy, but it may cost the Festival 20 times as much to attract the North American. The revenue benefits of the extra tourism spend do not accrue to the Festival, but they do help to achieve the broader aim of promoting the region.

Growth and the Management Challenge

Elements of Porter's (1998) competitive advantage strategy can be seen in the development of the Festival. Porter stressed the need for continuous innovation as a competitive strategy, and although innovation and nostalgia are odd bedfellows, the frequent addition of new components to the Festival can be seen as sustaining competitive advantage.

In interview the Director stated "it's all about adding to what we've got, without taking anything away from what we've got." In other words, he saw innovation not as "in with the new and out with the old" but more as "in with the new, and let's keep the old as well."

Getz (2002) has applied Porter's competitive advantage framework to event management. Competitors and rivalry are important forces acting for competitive advantage in Porter's framework. Getz related Porter's "positioning" in relation to festivals as "festivals can try to influence their environment, rather than merely react to changes" (Getz, 2002, p. 214).

The Wintersun Director stated that he did not perceive other festivals as being competitors or rivals to Wintersun, because of the uniqueness of Wintersun's brace of features. Rather, he saw other holiday and recreational activities as rivals. In other words, the Festival is positioned as a holiday/recreational experience and as such is competing for consumers' dollars with other holiday and recreational activities, which might range from scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef to attending major sporting events.

As part of the strategy development at Wintersun, effort has been put into organizing quality nighttime entertainment at various venues in the area in the week prior to the long weekend when the event climaxes. The objective behind this strategy was to encourage rock and roll enthusiasts to stay for the whole week, thereby increasing the average length of stay of patrons.

Residents of the largest near city, Brisbane (population 1.4 million), were the target of this strategy, as it had been noticed that Brisbane people were tending to be day-trippers, the driving time from Brisbane to Coolangatta being only 1.5–2 hours. There is anecdotal evidence of this strategy being successful, with the Festival Director claiming that accommodation providers were reporting high occupancy through the week.

Over the years 1995 to 2003 the Festival experienced rapid growth in two ways:

1. The organizers embarked upon a strategy of innovation and organic growth. According to the Festival Director, this was achieved by attempting to retain the existing components of the event, while each year adding new components.
2. Entertainment and hospitality venues in the area began to stage and promote their own programs of entertainment based around the Festival's nostalgia theme.

The only rigorous crowd count for Wintersun was carried out in 1998 (Fredline et al., 1998). This study used aerial photography, supplemented with sample counts at ground level to estimate a crowd of approximately 10,000 people. The event poses difficulty in crowd estimation because it has as its main attraction 2 days of free street entertainment. There are no tickets, no fences, and no turnstiles.

The data in Table 1 can be used as indicators of the growth of interest in, and in patronage of, the Festival since the 1998 crowd count. The table displays growth rates over 1998 to 2002 of between 260% (income) and 28% (car entries). The income growth is partly attributable to the growth in ticketed satellite entertainment at clubs and pubs from which the Festival derives income through agency and production fees and so may not be a good indicator of the growth in crowd numbers.

Merchandise sales include souvenir T-shirts, caps, coffee mugs, and compact discs of the bands' recordings. Although there has been some improvement in marketing merchandise over the period, the near trebling of sales would seem to be a fair guide to the increase in crowd size since 1999. Assuming that the 1999 crowd was bigger than 1998 (as shown by other indicators), this would put the 2002 crowd in excess of 30,000 people.

Table 1
Indicators of Growth of the Wintersun Festival, 1988–2002

	Total Income (\$'000)	Merchandise Sales (\$'000)	Car Entries (No.)	Database Levels
1998	91	n/a	390	2000
1999	248	22	410	2500
2000	259	29	415	2800
2001	278	40	460	3100
2002	330	59	580	3900

Source: Derived from information supplied by Wintersun.

The management challenge with the organic growth concerned the disenchantment of the original stakeholders. For example, when the event began to include more and more cars, the rock and roll enthusiasts were unhappy. The event had begun as a rock and roll festival with just music and dancing, and when it branched out into cars the rock and roll dance clubs were unhappy.

Because the membership lists of these clubs were important in marketing the event, Festival management had to make sure that the event continued to emphasize its musical roots. Management ensured that rather than become a car Festival with musical features, the music continued to dominate. The emergence of organized, ticketed nighttime shows featuring rock and roll bands helped preserve the musical roots of the event.

The blossoming of this entertainment organized and ticketed by hotels and clubs in the area complemented the Festival, but also had the potential to be competitive with "official" Festival performances. The Festival Director stressed his strong personal relationships with managers of the hotels and clubs, and expressed confidence that the informal links that these relationships produced were adequate for coordinating activities.

This growth in "satellite" performances is a common feature of musical festivals that are conducted in urban settings as opposed to those that occur entirely inside ticketed auditoria. The Tamworth Country Music Festival and the Goulburn Blues Festival are further examples of the Wintersun type of arrangement where the challenge is one of coordinating the performances that spring up as a result of venue managers' initiatives.

On the other hand, the Gympie Country Music Muster and the Byron Bay Blues Festival are examples of events that are completely isolated from their host community, fully ticketed, and centrally controlled. The management and coordination of performances at such festivals is clearly a much simpler task than it is at the Wintersun type of event.

A further issue that emerged in relation to Wintersun's growth was the effect on retailers in the shopping precinct of Coolangatta. In the early years the Festival brought added sales with little inconvenience. With the growth in numbers of festival patrons came congestion and parking problems for regular weekend customers. In addition, street closures of the main street through Coolangatta meant that the traders found that access for deliveries became difficult. The Wintersun Festival Director maintains close personal contact with the re-

tail traders and attempts to solve each problem individually. An example was the provision of a handcart for the newsagent to use to get the heavy weekend newspapers into the shop, parking outside not being available due to street closures.

Management Evolution

Over the period 1988 to 2003 the growth in the size and scope of the Wintersun Festival has been part of the vision of the long-running Festival Director who sees the event as a major part of the promotion of the southern section of the Gold Coast. This person's passion is not so much for its nostalgia theme, but for the success of the event in attracting visitors to a quality entertainment experience.

He stated in interview that he attends other festivals, as well as conferences on festival organization, in order to get ideas about both entertainment and event management. Getz (1998) found that "going to other events" was the most common method used by event managers in his survey for purposes of comparing their event and getting new ideas. The Wintersun Director has established links with managers/directors of similar events in the northern hemisphere with a view to cross-promotion.

The success of the Wintersun Festival appears to owe a great deal to this person's style and skill at dealing with a wide range of organizational and marketing problems on a very small budget. In the early years the event was small enough for the Director to do most of the organizing himself, but as the event has grown, more of the organizing occurs outside of his direct control.

Firstly, activities that are central to the event, such as the free band performances, the dance competition, the street parade, the car exhibition, etc., are all now delegated to subcommittees. The subcommittees report to the Board, and the Director plus one Board member sits on each subcommittee.

Secondly, the growth in performances in the pubs and clubs in the area is not under the direct control of the Festival Board or the Director. Coordination of the artists, venues, ticket prices, and themes is achieved by direct personal contact between the Director and the management of the respective venues. The coordination appears to work successfully because of the personality of the Director.

Thirdly, staging of the event has become more professional. Where the Director once borrowed a crane

to put up banners on light poles himself, the electricity company now has to be paid to do it themselves. Similarly, when the event was small, police on traffic duty were provided as part of police community service. These now have to be paid for. In addition, private security now is hired to do tasks that were once done by volunteers.

The next step in the evolution of Festival management would appear to be the expansion of the budget and the hiring of at least one staff member on paid service. This would enable the Director to delegate some functions, most probably marketing, while he concentrated on strategy and planning. In interview he stated that he was wary of employing staff at present because wage costs would eat up a sizable proportion of the budget. He was also worried about the effect on the morale of regular volunteers of bringing in a person to get paid for taking over some of their functions.

Conclusion

The Wintersun Festival has been running as a nostalgia festival on Australia's Gold Coast since 1988, and has had the same person as Festival Director for all of that time. Despite its small budget and heavy reliance on volunteers and word-of-mouth promotion, the event has grown in size and diversity. This growth has been a reflection of the strategic thinking of the Board and the Director.

As the event has grown, the objectives have evolved, and the Director has had to think about how to meet those objectives with strategy. This has involved a process of innovation in terms of components or facets of the event, and of market focus and segmentation. The latter is still evolving with the Director's sights being set on an international holiday market to supplement the existing local drive market.

While this has been a case study of a single event, there are some lessons to be learned about event management in general. Firstly, it seems that a level of detachment from the event's core activity is an advantage. The Wintersun Director is not passionate about

cars or music of the 1960s, but rather has a focus on providing an entertaining experience for visitors. This enables the event to appeal to a wide cross section of the public.

Secondly, as Getz (1998) has pointed out, event managers need to be always looking for new ideas, and learning from other events. Wintersun uses a structure of committees reporting to a Board of Directors to obtain input from groups who are passionate about the cars, the music, the dancing, the surfing styles, etc., of the 1960's baby boomer era. This input is supplemented by the Director's own input based upon his learning from other events, particularly music and entertainment events.

Thirdly, it appears that despite being a small festival, Wintersun has survived and succeeded by a process of diversification. Rather than "sticking to the knitting," Wintersun has added new facets at regular intervals, thereby injecting new life into the audience and their reason for attending. The general message here is that innovation is important in maintaining competitive advantage in a world where special events not only compete with each other but also compete with other forms of leisure and entertainment.

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