

Quick Fix

Eliminate event mishaps with this can't-miss list of planning tips.

BY JEN JONES



Even seasoned retailers can't escape Murphy's Law—"anything that can go wrong, will go wrong"—when it comes to store events. San Francisco-based marketing expert Laurel Tielis learned this firsthand when one of her clients ran out of credit card-processing slips in the middle of a major sale. "The store had been the subject of a big newspaper feature the day before, and they got a rush of people," she says. An employee had to leave a long line of customers waiting at the register to borrow supplies from another store. "You may be doing everything right, but things can still happen," Tielis says. So how can you lock in a best-case scenario for your next event? *DRN* interviewed Tielis and several veteran storeowners for a list of planning tips.

PLAN WAY AHEAD

Starting your preparations early may be the most obvious tip, but it is also the most often ignored. Jo Steadman, owner of Freestyle Dancewear in South Williamsport, PA, learned that she needs at least six months to plan her annual fall fashion show, including finding models, securing a location and ordering decorations. "Without a plan of action, your event will come across as being thrown together—and that doesn't promote a positive response," says Steadman.

Even on the day of the event, according to Steadman, storeowners should overestimate how much prep time they'll need. "The first time, I only gave myself an hour, and that was not enough," she says. "I was still setting up as people were coming in." Now, Steadman sets up decorations, chairs, signage and merchandise tables the night before.

Giving customers ample notice is also smart. Sherry White of Arabesque Dancewear in Lake Forest, IL, learned to start promoting the annual *Nutcracker* event well before Thanksgiving. Her first time, the party, which featured a story, party favors and coloring sheets, did not draw the attention she was hoping for. "Only one little girl came," she says.

HAVE EXTRA HANDS ON DECK

At Downtown Dancewear in Lowell, MA, owner Liliana Kualapai holds several events each year—one is a large-scale anniversary party. For the event, she sets up tents outside and provides games, activities and refreshments, along with steep discounts and goodie bags. "Before we even open, people are waiting outside," she says.

All that demand translates to a need for extra bodies. "The first year was overwhelming because we didn't know what to expect, and I was extremely understaffed," Kualapai says. "Now I hire extra people to help set up, play games with the kids and clean up. That allows

our employees to concentrate on ringing up sales and fitting shoes.”

“One of the biggest mistakes stores make,” Tielis adds, “is not having someone handling the cash register at all times during a sale event.” For smaller stores that can’t afford extra help, she suggests enlisting family and friends to help out. Assign someone you trust to the checkout counter while your experienced employees work on the sales floor.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Retailers planning an event should be prepared to use their problem-solving skills. Tielis recalls attending one summer event where the air-conditioning broke; the storeowners were forced to bring out fans and open windows in an effort to cool off their guests. “The first thing to do is apologize, and the second thing is to see how you can fix it,” she says. “It’s always best to be authentic, put yourself in the place of your attendees and think about what you would want if you were there.”

Handle whatever issues arise with grace. “Athletes and dancers fall down, get up, and what happens? The crowd applauds,” says Tielis.


“Get up, start smiling and be the good hostess—people like you when you do that, and once they like you, it’s easy.”

RECAP YOUR RESULTS

A high-energy fashion show or a festive holiday party can become an annual affair, so it’s important to devote time to a post-event evaluation. “I always sit down and make notes about what worked, what didn’t work and ideas for next time,” says Steadman. “I also write down specifics, like the number of tables and chairs I set up or how many balloons I purchased. A year from now, I won’t remember those little details.”

Steadman makes changes to her fashion show based on what she’s learned from the previous year. In the past, audience members didn’t remember the style numbers when they tried to purchase clothing from the show. This year, Steadman is breaking up the show by brand and designing a program that lists what each model is wearing. She’s also going to serve food earlier. “Last year I had a local café set up, but they didn’t sell as much as they wanted,” she says.

Other storeowners are also capitalizing on their hard-earned knowledge. This year Sherry White moved her annual *Nutcracker* party from Sunday to a weekday in hopes of increasing attendance. And Kualapai will forgo time-consuming pointe shoe fitting at the next annual party. “It was just too crazy,” she says. She also remembers to save more vendor freebies throughout the year to add to the goodie bags.

“Think about why you are doing this—what are your goals?” says Tielis. “Do you want to attract new business, get press or bring back existing customers? All of this makes a big difference in how you’ll present your event.” Offer first time customers a discount. For returning customers, make the deal sweeter—offer them the same discount plus an additional 10 percent off to thank them for their support. “It demonstrates to new customers that if they continue to shop with you their patronage will be recognized,” Tielis says. To get press, Tielis suggests making your event newsworthy. Invite a local dance celebrity. “That exponentially increases your chance of getting publicity,” she adds. 

Jen Jones is a freelance writer and dance instructor based in Los Angeles.

How Much Is Too Much?

Refreshments play a major role in making an event successful. But how can you tell how much you’ll need? Laurel Tielis says that it’s better to be overstocked than to run out of supplies mid-party. Here’s what she recommends:

Food: Estimate 4–6 hors d’oeuvres per person per hour. “That means you’re looking at 8–12 items per person for a two-hour event and 12–18 for a three-hour event,” Tielis says.

To save money, ask a friend to dress up and serve appetizers. “People eat more when food is served buffet-style than they do when it’s butlered,” she adds. “That’s why it’s a good idea to pass around more expensive items, like shrimp.”

Beverages: If you’re hosting a ladies’ night or spa event for dance moms and plan to serve alcohol, remember a bottle of wine provides five glasses and people tend to drink two glasses in the first hour, one in the second. “Fill the glasses half full after the first serving, unless the guest asks for more,” says Tielis. “That helps the hostess’ budget and the guest’s sobriety.”

Paper Goods: Tielis recommends two to three items per person. “Although it sounds like a lot,” she says, “people do tend to take a new plate each time they go to the buffet table, or a new glass each time they have a soft drink.”

1/3h

6.5" x 6 5/8"