

## Marketing the Food Festival

### A how to guide from footfall



### Making your food festival a success

“Build it and they will come”; the prophetic words spoken by Ray Liotta may have worked in *Field of Dreams*, but in the real world getting people to turn out for your event can be a whole lot harder.

Creating a festival is a huge amount of hard work, often by a small dedicated team of volunteers who may also have other full time jobs. It is important that all the work put in by this team doesn't go to waste, that the festival is a success, that visitors come in numbers and have an enjoyable day out. To ensure this happens it is crucial to put marketing at the core of your plans.

What follows is an outline of how to attract visitors to your food festival based on the experience of putting on the successful 2009 Henley Food Festival, where over 10,000 visitors enjoyed great food, demonstrations, celebrity chefs, producers and suppliers in an increasingly muddy site over two days in May.

### Planning

Whatever activity you are undertaking it pays to plan your marketing strategy well in advance. Don't leave it to the last minute; it is integral to the success of your event. And don't think that someone can do it as an add-on to another job – you should dedicate a member of the team and ensure it gets done properly.

Make sure your marketing person knows what's going on. It's very easy, especially if the festival is organised by volunteers, for people to compartmentalise their information because

they don't think others need to know or they don't feel they have the time to share. Something that may seem insignificant to one team member may be important to another, and in this context may open up an important or interesting marketing angle.

See the check list at the end of this document to help you prioritise and timetable the various tactics you can employ.

### What to consider at the start

#### Brand: Image, Logo, Look

Your festival needs an easily recognisable image, a logo, something that simply encapsulates your foodie ethos and the feel of the local area. You also need a colour scheme that will work on your website and all your printed material. Combined together when people see the logo and colours they should think of you.



The Henley Food Festival logo combines simple devices of glass and cutlery with a stylised version of Henley Bridge and the name of the festival in bold but subtle colours. The sponsors logo was added at a later date but thought was given at the start of the design process as to where this would go.

Creating a look and feel can be expensive, so consider asking a local design or web agency to work with you as part of a sponsorship package. Food Festival's are a fantastic, under used way of entertaining clients. Sold in the right way you could create a long term relationship that achieves great results for both of you.

### Marketing Messages

#### What to say and when

Who is your audience and what should you be saying to them? Before sending anything into the world about your festival it pays to consider who you are trying to attract and what is it about your festival that will attract them.

You are going to have a number of different audiences ranging from the press to dedicated foodies to people who are only casually interested in what you are doing. It pays to prioritise the importance of each group and write your marketing messages accordingly.

Having said that, there are some essentials that everyone will want to know; date, time, location. Don't underestimate the importance of telling people where they can park and what there is to do for children.

Think about what is unique or different whether it be cooking demonstrations, celebrity chefs, organic food, slow food, local produce, wine demonstrations, location, music etc. Use each of these to create a buzz about the festival. Don't send everything out at once, drip feed it through all your methods of communication so there is something new and interesting to say each month, week and day.

## The Food Festival's Website

Simple; Informative; Navigable



Your website will be the major source for disseminating information, therefore it is an important part of your brand and should reflect the festival's ethos. As such it needs to tie in with the colours of your logo, without being a slave to them. Most importantly it needs to be informative and contain all the essential information a visitor will need; what's on, timetable, tickets, location, parking, enquiries & contact information.

It is also worth considering what information should be on the site for the press, sponsors and exhibitors.

Make sure the site is kept up to date with news and information. Information can be drip fed day by day and week by week so the event builds momentum and the site remains lively and vibrant. This drip feed should coincide with all your other marketing communications.

Make the site easy to navigate. The biggest mistake web designers make is to make the information difficult to find. As a rule of thumb if it takes more than two clicks of the mouse to find something, users will give up.

Write your text for the web. This is a different style to writing press releases or brochures. Users read sites differently to printed pages, scanning them for snippets of information, therefore it is essential to keep sentences and paragraphs concise, informative and relevant. And don't forget to spell check.

Writing properly also helps with search optimisation, alongside the use of key words in your text that help identify the site for search engines. More importantly for search optimisation



try and have links to your site from as many other sites as you can organise. These can be from sponsors, exhibitors, ticket sites, tourist organisations, hotels etc. You can make it easy for them by creating a button that clicks through to the festival site, such as the one on the left.

If there is regular news, updates, announcements and information consider creating a monthly email newsletter. This is simple enough to organise, but make sure you don't email people too often and that you delete people who don't want to receive it.

While there is much more that can be said about creating a good website, it is content and navigation that are most important. If you can persuade a local web design company to help you they will be able to guide you.

## Foodie and listings websites

There are now numerous websites aimed at the foodie in the UK, many of which carry listings, some of which will carry more detailed information or run competitions. It is worth exploring these and at the very least making sure you are listed.

What's On websites are also numerous, make sure you appear on them. Remember the more links you have to your own website the higher you will appear in Google (and other search engine) rankings.

## Social Networking

Logging; Facebook ; Twitter...

There is a lot of talk about social networking, but as yet not a large volume of evidence showing how useful it is from a marketing point of view. Having said that if you are sensible about what you do and if you have the time to do it there are some benefits to be gained.

Creating a Facebook Group is easy and if you get all your friends to get their friends to join before long you can have a pretty large group. What's the point? The point is that this is a quick and easy way of disseminating new information, with the group doing most of the work for you. For example you can run a competition which, if it's any good, the members of the group will send onwards to their friends, thus creating wider recognition for your event. As with all marketing don't lose sight of why you are using the tactic, remember that the ultimate goal is to get visitors to attend your food festival.

Using Twitter can achieve a similar goal to Facebook, the great benefit being that it is delivered straight to mobile phones as well as PC's if people have subscribed to your Twitter feed. Remember that your Twitter message is a maximum of only 140 characters.



Bloggng. Bloggng is basically an online diary that can either be a dedicated page on your website or can be hosted elsewhere with a link to the site. It can also be created as an RSS feed that browsers can subscribe to. You might want to consider a blog as an alternative way of building up excitement about the festival. For example you could use one of the organisers to write something on a weekly basis leading up to the festival. It can all be done in a much more informal and chatty style than other marketing communications, giving flavour and colour to the event. Remember again that there is no point in having a blog unless it is relevant, interesting and regularly updated.

There are other social networking opportunities available, bebo, Flickr, You Tube, LinkedIn, Digg, StumbleUpon etc, however remember that it can all become very time consuming. So think carefully about the result that you can achieve by using each of these opportunities.

## Press

Local; Regional; National; Food

For the purposes of a food festival you can divide the printed press into four broad categories; local, regional, national and foodie. Though the national and foodie press are glamorous and potentially useful your biggest supporters, the ones you need to spend the most time cultivating, are your local and possibly regional papers. By local I mean the one (or if you're lucky more than one in your town) and by regional the papers in the surrounding area.



For the Henley Food Festival we struck up a sponsorship agreement with the Henley Standard that guaranteed the festival coverage in the 3 months leading up to the festival weekend, including an 8 page supplement on the weekend before the festival, (see the cover of the paper above). Hopefully you will find that your local paper will be keen to support the event, they normally are.

Remember that 80% of your visitors will come from within a 30 mile radius so your local paper is vitally important, but so are the papers of surrounding towns. While most local papers typically are parochial in their coverage, they are also often short of news, so a good story will get coverage even if it is just outside their area.

In Henley we utilised the restaurants and chefs appearing at the festival who were most local to a particular paper's circulation area and then concentrated on their stories for

individual papers. In this way we received advance coverage in all of the surrounding towns without having to spend money on advertising.

There is a good chance that you also have regional magazines and even regional foodie magazines. It is worth talking to these about longer features and pieces about some of the



## Henley's Food Festival

From it's new home on the riverbank the 2009 Henley Food Festival promises an extravaganza to satisfy everyone's tastes.

Words by Peter McConwell

Sampling tasty morsels from some of the regions best restaurants, before watching cookery demonstrations conducted by Michelin starred chefs, all washed down with a pint of the local brew or a glass of fine sounds like foodie heaven.

Yes the return of the Henley Food Festival promises three simple delights alongside much more to tempt food lovers from across the Thames Valley.

Following a year's break, Henley Food Festival returns to the town on 10th & 11th May, located in its new home in the public park alongside the river at the Phyllis Court Club. In this beautiful setting organisers are promising to showcase the very best in food and drink that the region has to offer.

This will be a step up from previous food festivals, according to Simon Cromack, one of the Henley Food Festival directors.

"What we are planning is a food extravaganza, highlighting the best restaurants from around the region. But what makes this festival unique," he continued "is the quality of the chef's demonstrating their skills live to the public in our fantastic new Big Top." Indeed there is an impressive cut list of chef demonstrations, including much loved food writer Mary Berry, Michelin starred chef's Theo Randall, Tom Kerridge, John Campbell, Philip

Howard and Anil Kochhar; Laili's and Raymond Blane's cookery schools plus local stars Paul Clewgham, Mike Robinson and of course Annette Worrall Thomson. There will, in fact, be at least eighteen demonstrations over the course of the two day event.

Worrall Thomson, has been one of the festival's patrons from the very start, and is genuinely excited to be playing his part again. "I am thrilled to be part of Henley Food Festival," he said, "the move to Phyllis Court is really exciting and I am sure it will be bigger and better than ever before. Seeing new faces at the festival such as Giancarlo Caldesi and Anil Kochhar, performing alongside our local favourites will add some Mediterranean flair and spice."

Asked about his own role during the event Worrall Thomson explained, "As patron, I will be there over the two days, judging cook off's, demonstrating and behind the counter as our restaurant stand it will be a great family event for all. I can't wait!"

The cook off's Worrall Thomson notes are the chance for home chefs to take part in head to head cooking contests in the weeks preceding the festival, before a fierce watching final in front of the Big Top audience, judged by Worrall Thomson himself.

One of the festival's stars, famous from his TV series *Reston*

in Turany, is Giancarlo Caldesi who runs Caldesi in Carrington in Here alongside a home and cookery school in Etonish. He is promoting something special with his Italian Village where he will be offering superb Italian cooking and produce with the support of fine wines from the South East and the Malvern Hills, Italian Continental Stores.

"We are honoured to be bringing our corner of Italy to such a wonderful British event," proclaimed Caldesi, "I am delighted that we have this great opportunity to celebrate superb food and wine in such a beautiful setting and to bring our true culture together."

Alongside the restaurants and chef demonstration, food producers and suppliers will be on hand offering a wide range of fresh meat, cheese, cakes, vegetables, breads, jams and preserves. Plus, for the first time this year there will be a retail arena where visitors can purchase kitchen equipment to make the most of the excellent range of produce.

Cromack and his fellow organisers are promising a real celebration of food and drink and still have a few surprises in store, that will make the weekend of 10th & 11th May a real food lover's festa.

Tickets for the Henley Food Festival are £4.50, details available at [www.henleyfoodfestival.co.uk](http://www.henleyfoodfestival.co.uk)

Left, example of an article placed in a regional magazine a month before Henley Food Festival 2009.

National press i.e. national newspapers and magazines may or may not put you in their listings or news, you will need perseverance to try and make good contacts who like what you are doing. Remember there are over 60 food festivals in the UK, so you will need to be offering something unique and unusual to make journalists sit up and take notice.

The food press: specialist food

press often have a particular affiliation with a particular show. BBC Good Food with the Good Food Show for example. Olive is also a BBC magazine. This does not necessarily prevent them from writing about you. What it does mean is that you are unlikely to get into anything more than the news pages or the diary section; coverage that shouldn't be undervalued. Many regions have their own local food magazine. If so you should think about negotiating a sponsorship deal that will give you coverage in the months leading up to the festival and some good post event coverage.

All the press should be sent regular information about the festival, preferably in the form of press releases, but if you have links with particular papers or magazines you may want to brief them more regularly. There will be a lot of information that you want people to read, the key is not to give everything out at the same time, drip feed it so there is always something new to talk about.

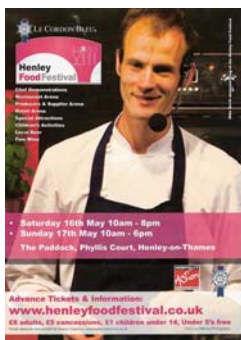
## Sponsors



If you have sponsors for the festival there are three marketing actions you must do; acknowledge them on your website; ensure they link to your site and ensure they use their press and marketing resources to publicise the festival.

*Left, sponsors banner at the 2009 Henley Food Festival.*

## Posters



Creating a poster containing essential information is important. Not everyone reads a newspaper or searches the internet. If there are poster sites around the town you could consider using these, however they are expensive.

The easiest method of poster distribution is to ask shops to display it in their window, you'll be surprised how many do. Also give them to sponsors, exhibitors, parish councils, sports clubs etc, in fact anywhere with a notice board.

*Left a poster from the 2009 Henley Food Festival.*

## Banners & Signage

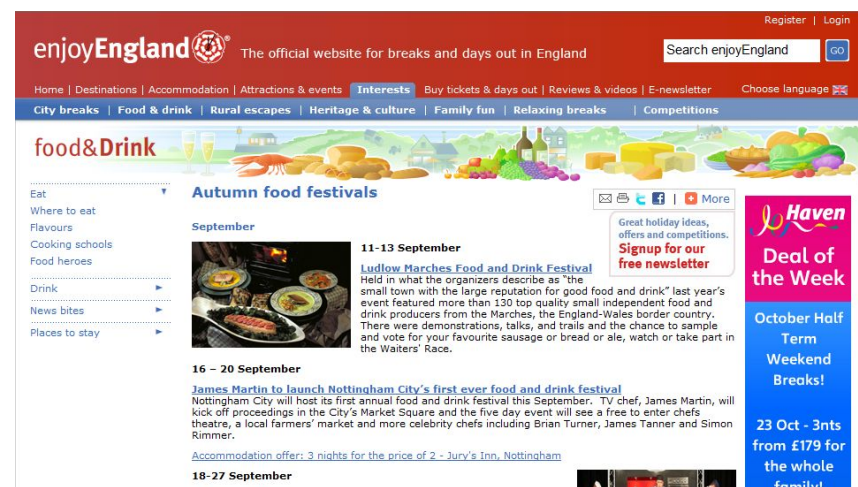
There may be somewhere in the town where a banner can be draped across the road so it is visible to pedestrians and motorists. Your town council should be able to tell you if this is possible and how to go about the process. Make sure on the banner you have dates, times and location and that it goes up at least a week in advance of the event.

Your signage serves two purposes; publicity and directions. Ideally you should look at AA or RAC signage which is not expensive, for directional signage. These will normally go up a few days before the event. You may also want to put up more branded signage closer to the event directing visitors to parking, the festival site, individual attractions etc. If you are erecting signs around the area you should consult your local authority before doing so. Remember the design is important as motorists will only see them for a second or two so key information should be easy to read.

## Local and national tourism agencies

No matter where you are in the country you will be covered by a local tourism agency (e.g. Tourism South East, Visit North West, Visit Wales etc). The English ones are connected to

the national tourism authority Enjoy England. Larger metropolitan towns may also have a town tourism agency provided by the local authority (e.g. Visit Liverpool or Destination Bristol). If you don't know who your local agency is a good place to start is either the local authority of Tourist Information Centre, if you are lucky enough still to have one.



*Above, the Enjoy England site showing Autumn 2009 food festivals.*

These organisations will be interested in what you are doing and you may want to develop plans with them as a matter of course. Otherwise keep them informed. They will put you on their websites, include you in 'what to do' information and provide valuable support. In addition they feed information through to Enjoy England so you will find that your festival will appear on this site also. Ultimately it may go on to the Visit Britain site aimed at overseas visitors.

Tourism Information Centres (TIC). TIC's will be happy to take posters, leaflets, programmes etc. They may even be happy to sell tickets for you, cultivate them early in the process.

## Advertising

If you have the funds it is worth considering advertising. Be warned it can be expensive. Where you advertise is the key to success. It may be that a small number of carefully targeted ads will reach a group that otherwise wouldn't hear about the festival, however you should consider whether PR can do the same job.

## Broadcast

### TV & Radio

If you are running a major festival there is a chance you will be able to get national broadcasters interested otherwise you should concentrate on gaining airtime from local radio

and regional TV. You may also be able to persuade one of the satellite TV food channels to attend and broadcast live or record a magazine piece.



Local radio will comprise of a BBC station and one or more commercial stations. A commercial station may be persuaded to sponsor the event, in which case you should receive excellent radio coverage. A BBC station is unlikely to sponsor but may still give valuable pre event coverage and might want to broadcast from the festival. The key is to contact them early in your planning and get them involved.

*Above, Roy Ackerman and camera crew filming at the 2009 Henley Food Festival.*

The festival will also need spokesmen who can talk in detail on air. You should nominate one of the organisers to take the lead on this, and if you have one or two high profile chefs that are happy to talk about the festival you should ensure they are fully briefed. Many chefs are regulars on radio as well as local TV and will usually be happy to give events they are involved in a helpful plug.

## Spokesmen

Organisers, chefs & exhibitors

As I have stated elsewhere you should make sure you have a nominated spokesman who can talk to the press. Remember they can be asked awkward questions too. They should be happy to be contacted directly by journalists and to speak on broadcast media. It also pays to have a couple of chefs and exhibitors who can be put up for interview and who can plug the festival whenever they are interviewed.

## Pre-festival events



To give the food festival some pre event buzz consider running some taster events, something that the press can get their teeth into, which will excite the public. In Henley we ran an Amateur Chef cooking competition using a few of the local pubs to host heats and semi finals in the two months leading up to the festival itself.

*Above, the two finalists at the 2009 Henley Food Festival cook-off with judges Mike North and Stuart Connibear from sponsor le Cordon Bleu.*

At the festival the winners battled it out in a live cook-off in the demonstration theatre. The result was weekly coverage in the local newspaper, mentions on local radio, branding on posters in the local pubs and genuine interest from the public.

There are numerous ways of creating a buzz before the festival itself including; press launches, calls for volunteers, photo opportunities, meet the chefs, mini cooking demonstrations in the town square or shopping centre, handing out leaflets in the preceding weeks etc.

## Competitions

Local press and local radio love competitions. You can also ensure coverage in papers further afield with a good competition. For example the Henley Food Festival partnered with one of its sponsors in 2009 and was able to run a competition in the London Evening Standard, a paper with a circulation of nearly a quarter of a million. This would cost thousands in advertising but is free if the competition is right.

Food Festivals should have especially good prizes to give away if they approach exhibitors and sponsors to get involved. Competitions should be used as a tactic to start the buzz about the festival and can appear on your own website as well as all your partners and press.

## Previous visitors

Word of mouth

Whether this is the first festival you have run or the 20<sup>th</sup> you need to think about how to attract more visitors next year and how to attract this year's visitors next year. Therefore you need to data capture visitors information so you can contact them in advance of the next festival. Ideally you would capture information as visitors purchase tickets in advance, however you may be a free festival or you are only selling tickets on the day so think about how to gather the data.

Clearly it's not worth holding up the flow of traffic through the entrance therefore its worth considering a feedback form with a competition in the programme if you have one and on the festival's website. At least this way you can capture some of your visitors data.

If selling tickets in advance it is easy either over the phone, by post or preferably on the internet to capture information and for people to agree to having information sent to them by email.

Previous visitors are already your customers. If they have enjoyed their visit they are likely to return and to tell their friends about the festival. They can perform your all important word of mouth marketing, so make sure they know about the festival in plenty of time for the following year. Most people have email and if it is something they are interested in will be happy to accept email newsletters or information blasts. Make sure though, to give them the choice to opt out and don't contact them too often, but do contact them!

## Ticketing

See Tickets



If you are charging for entry, ideally you would sell tickets in advance. It is simpler than you may think to set up an online ticket shop with no cost to you. With 'See Tickets' for example you can establish a parallel website. The customer is charged a small admin fee for buying online. This fee pays 'See Tickets' costs and makes their profit. It's very simple and gives you a lot of useful data. As far as the customer is concerned it is seamless with your website. Using a company such as 'See Tickets' gives you access to all their online and email marketing and helps to create extra links that will increase your Google ranking.

## Evaluation

As we have seen there are many tactics that can be used to market a food festival. In order to refine the process for the following year it is important to discover which of these tactics has worked for you, therefore you should measure the results.

This can be time consuming and in the rush to put the festival on is often forgotten, but it is important and can help save money. Think about feedback forms, online feedback, surveys at the festival and competition entries. You can even survey by SMS message. Above all you should find out how visitors heard about the festival, i.e. local newspaper article, radio, internet, word of mouth etc. Your local or regional tourist agency may even be able to help you.

Use the evaluation to inform your marketing strategy for the following year.

## Summary

When planning a food festival it is vitally important to remember who you are doing it for whether it is the local community, as an opportunity to highlight great local producers, a way of attracting more tourists into the area, a chance to showcase regional cooking talent or as a pure commercial exercise. Decide who the festival is for and aim your marketing at the appropriate people.

There are numerous tactics that can be employed but bearing in mind that the majority of visitors will come from the surrounding area it is worth weighting your marketing effort towards local and regional press and broadcast media.



The web has revolutionised the way we gather information, so your site must be well written, informative and easy to navigate. Update it regularly and make sure it is easy to

find through search engines as it will become the primary source of information used by visitors and potential visitors.

Finally consider which of the various marketing tactics you will have the time and resources to utilise and how effective they will be for you, then plan and prioritise.

## Check list

Think about everything you need to do, remember the focus should be on attracting visitors to the festival. Prioritise and timetable actions. The list below may be helpful but there will be other elements individual festival organisers will want to add:

- **Marketing Plan; priorities, timeline**
- **Branding - image and logo**
- **Marketing Messages**
- **Designated spokesmen**
- **Website; images, regular updates**
- **Links**
- **Social networks**
- **Regular email newsletters**
- **Press Releases**
- **Local press relationships**
- **Posters**
- **Leaflets**
- **Advertising**
- **Banners & Signage**
- **Contacting TV & Radio**
- **Contacting previous visitors**
- **Sponsors & exhibitors**
- **Publicity events**
- **Competitions**
- **Evaluation**

For help and advice with marketing a food festival contact:

Peter McConnell at Footfall Services

[peter@footfallservices.com](mailto:peter@footfallservices.com)

+44(0)1865 522632

+44(0)7767 640668

**footfall**  
visitor marketing