

Planning a Cannabis Festival: A study of the 4/20 Festival in Denver, Colorado

Summary

This case study explores the background, strategy, planning, execution, and post-event evaluation for a public cannabis festival in Denver, Colorado. The 4/20 Festival began as an ad hoc event in 1993 when a few dozen cannabis legalization advocates assembled in Denver's Civic Center Park in support of the reform of marijuana laws in the state. During the first few years of the existence of the event it remained ad hoc and unpermitted. Though marijuana remained illegal, the event eventually grew so large that the city required it to be organized and permitted if it were to continue. Today the 4/20 Cannabis Festival in Denver is organized, permitted, and marketed as the "largest free 4/20 gathering on earth". The current iteration of the festival includes food vendors, clothing & paraphernalia vendors, a beer garden, and stages for musical acts. Admittance is free to the public, but certain entrance conditions, including passing through metal detectors, must be met.

Learning Outcomes

This case requires students to understand the planning and execution of a cannabis-themed festival in Denver, Colorado. After completing this case, students should:

- Understand the overall history and development of the 4/20 festival in Colorado.
- Compare and contrast key event stages between non-cannabis based events and cannabis-based events.
- If possible, compare a cannabis-based event in their state with the case.
- Explain operational challenges that festival organizers may experience in hosting a cannabis-themed festival or event in your state or municipal.
- Discuss more legal, political, operational, and safety/security issues related to hosting a cannabis event.
- Understand the critical importance of debriefing and post-event evaluation, which is one of the more neglected steps for introductory event planners.

Target Audience

This case study is suitable for both undergraduate and graduate level (master's degree) students in hospitality management, tourism, event planning, and recreation & tourism programs. While it is primarily directed at events and festival management coursework, it could have applications in other areas such as hospitality marketing, strategic planning, and legal issues in hospitality. Students using this case should have some introductory level knowledge in general hospitality,

event planning, and hospitality law, however with some additional background readings, it could be suited to most levels of post-secondary hospitality or marketing education.

Teaching Objectives and Suggested Themes

Events that are based in the suggestion of consumption of intoxicating products by adults, be they wine festivals, beer festivals, or cannabis festivals are among the most challenging type of festivals to successfully execute and manage. On top of all the regular organizational issues there are different strategic challenges for events that potentially involve some sort of intoxicant; including higher cost of insurance required, heightened public scrutiny, and increased jurisdictional oversight. This case will allow students to explore and understand the challenges associated with events that are outside the norm for most event planners and managers. Given the ever-increasing number of jurisdictions where marijuana is legal as a recreational substance, opportunities to plan events coordinated with cannabis consumption are on the rise.

The teaching objectives for this study are to:

- Familiarizing the student with the practices and responsibilities of an event that is based on the consumption of potentially intoxicating substances.
- Reinforcing understanding of the importance of working with jurisdictional authorities and other stakeholders in the community where the event is held.
- Comparing and contrasting this type of event with others that the students may have studied or have familiarity with.
- Understanding the unique challenges faced by organizers of events where intoxicating substances are the focus.

Teaching Approach

The best approach to using the case in a classroom may be to use the chronological approach. The five stages of the event were 1) the permit-holder and event organizer planning the event, 2) the organizers begin planning the event, 3) the event organizer working with jurisdictional authorities and regulatory agencies to obtain all permissions and permits, 4) obtaining vendors for the event, and 5) conducting the post-event evaluation and debriefings.

This material can be covered in two normal (50–75 minute) class sessions. While most undergraduate and graduate students should be familiar with aspects of legal marijuana in the United States, it may prove useful to have access to printed or video resources that provide background to the topic, especially in states or nations where marijuana is still illegal. This could be assigned as pre-class preparation

with students bringing questions or discussion points to the session with them in order to focus on the operational issues outlined in the previous section. To maximize in class discussion time, students should be assigned the case study reading outside of class and required to bring in 3-5 original questions (typewritten and printed to ensure it is completed before class).

One effective strategy is for students to engage in small groups (3-4 MAX) as they answer, but also hold full class discussions. Two suggestions to accomplish this are:

1. On day one, students divide into groups and collaborate answers for Phases 1-3. This should take about 50-60% of the class period, after which time students compare their small group answers in a full class discussion. For day two, follow the same pattern for Phases 4-5.
2. On day one, students divide into groups and collaborate answers for Phases 1-5. The instructor collects the answers. On day two, the instructor distributes the answers back to the groups, and the entire day is comparing small group answers in full class discussion.

Phase One: Understanding the Event

- Have the students review the section of the case study entitled Background. Cannabis events have traditionally been ad-hoc events where the planning occurs outside the normal channels of event management. While many events have been allowed to proceed due to concerns that disallowing them would lead to events that local law enforcement would be unable to control and police, and possible First Amendment court challenges, they were essentially illegal events.

Questions to ask include:

- What has happened at past events that underscores the need for comprehensive planning and professional event management?
- What are some of the features of a cannabis event that would mark them as distinctly different from beer or wine festivals?
- A city or municipality is often forced to spend money on these types of ad-hoc events. What are the specific things they are forced to spend money on?
- Provide specific financial benefits to the city in choosing to hold a formal event (Remember, NOT spending money is a benefit).

Phase Two: Planning the Event

- While there are similarities between a cannabis festival and a beer, wine, or spirits festival there are significant differences as well. In discussions of this section, emphasis should be placed on identifying these differences as well as special challenges faced by organizers due to legal limitations and public percep-

tions of cannabis consumption, even in jurisdictions where recreational consumption is legal. Another complicating factor is the size of the event. The event analyzed in the case study drew 75,000 attendees, roughly the same number of people who attend the average NFL football game.

Questions to ask include:

- Public intoxication from alcohol is illegal in nearly all jurisdictions and public venues, but alcohol consumption is still permitted at many festivals and events. This scenario is essentially what happened at this 4/20 festival in regards to illegal cannabis consumption in public. In your experience at festivals or large events, give specific examples of how public intoxication is mitigated by event planners.
- Would there be any difference for how it might be managed with cannabis consumption?
- Are there controls that can be put in place for beer, wine, and spirit festivals that cannot be feasibly used for cannabis consumption?

Phase Three: Working with Jurisdictional Authorities and Regulatory Agencies

- Any organized and permitted public event will involve numerous interactions with jurisdictional authorities and regulatory agencies. In the case of the 4/20 event in Denver organizers were required to get permits from more than 20 different city agencies in order for the event to proceed.

Questions to ask include:

- Just using the information in the reading, identify the permits that event organizers obtained for this festival (HINT: not all 20 are in the case study).
- Do an internet search (5 minutes MAX) and see what festival permits are listed that you did not identify in the first two questions.
- One of the motivators for the City of Denver to consider a new permit holder for the 4/20 event were acts of vandalism and violence. Violence is a possibility at any large gathering of people and is a serious planning concern at an event where intoxicants may be available and consumed. Consider the question of violence from these perspectives:
 - Planning – the best option is, of course, to prevent violence from occurring at all. What strategies could be employed in the planning phase to reduce or minimize the chance of violent activities?
 - Prevention – what steps could be taken to prepare for the possibility of the outbreak of violence at the event? What kind of personnel and equipment should you consider having on-site?
 - Reaction – Dealing with victims and perpetrators of vio-

lence will be critical if a violent act occurs. How might you deal with victims, perpetrators and/or bystanders in the case of a violent incident?

The immediate situation and reaction of people attending the event is not your only concern. Once the event has concluded, incidents of violence will be prominent in traditional media and social media. You will also have to explain and justify your actions to jurisdictional authorities. What might be some strategies for dealing with these stakeholders?

Phase Four: Identifying and Recruiting Vendors

- The organizers of the Denver 4/20 event are industry veterans. Team Player Productions (TPP) has been in business for 23 years. They have a roster of preferred vendors and organizations that they regularly subcontract chores like site clean-up to. Many vendors and sub-contractors are hesitant to be associated with a cannabis event. This caused TPP to seek out and hire vendors and organizations who were willing to be associated with this event.

Questions to ask include:

- Like many other businesses, the event world is about relationships. TPP had been using the same sub-contractors for years. Knowing this festival was going to be different than any they had previously planned, and knowing that TPP values those subcontractor relationships, how should they approach an event “pitch” to those long-term partners?
- When TPP approached new vendors for this festival, what specific information should they share about the event (or themselves as an organization) to help encourage these partnerships?

Phase Five: Debriefing and Post-event Evaluation

- Debriefing the event with both internal and external stakeholders is a critical control point of any event management process. This becomes even more critical when a permit holder or contracted event company wishes to obtain the permit or the sub-contract for execution for future events.

Questions to ask include:

- One of the best ways to evaluate success is to understand WHO cares, and then know WHAT they care about. Identify all the stakeholders for this event. These are people or groups who have a direct impact, or who stand to benefit or lose based on the success of the event.
- Identify some goals of each stakeholder. Goals fall into two categories, primary and secondary.

Primary goals are obvious and easy to recognize because they are inherently part of what is

happening. An event wouldn't happen without primary goals.

Secondary goals are things that somebody really wants to happen, even if they don't immediately come to mind. These are harder to identify (and accomplish), and they usually involve various stakeholders.

- Based on the goals of each stakeholder, what are the specific measures of success? Remember, sales, profits, and the number of attendees are relatively easy to track. But for many goals (like attendee satisfaction), these are much harder to realistically measure.

Suggested Additional Readings

- Blevins, J. (2016, October 2). Record 16.4 million tourists spent \$5 billion in Denver last year. *Denver Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.denverpost.com/2016/06/15/denver-tourism-record-2015/>
- Henchman, J. & Scarboro, M. (2016, May 12). Marijuana legalization and taxes: Lessons for other states from Colorado and Washington. Tax Foundation. Retrieved from <https://taxfoundation.org/marijuana-taxes-lessons-colorado-washington/>
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- Murray, J. (2016, November 19). Bars can't seek new Denver social marijuana use permits allowed by Initiative 300, state says. *Denver Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.denverpost.com/2016/11/18/bars-cant-seek-new-denver-social-marijuana-use-permits-allowed-by-initiative-300/>
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- Sommers, C. (2017, March 5). Colorado cannabis wedding expo showcases everything needed for a marijuana wedding. *Ganjabpreneur*. Retrieved from <https://www.ganjabpreneur.com/colorado-cannabis-wedding-expo-showcases-marijuana-wedding-companies/>
- Wallace, A. (2016, October 26). Report: Colorado weed is now a behemoth with a \$2.4 billion economic impact. *Denver Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.denverpost.com/2016/10/26/colorado-weed-economic-impact-report/>

4/20 Festival Learning Activity Plan

This learning activity plan is a condensed version of the teaching notes and teaching approach to this case study. For advanced event planning courses, or for students engaged in a full event planning program of study, or event planning concentration within a Hospitality Management major, we recommend utilizing most or all of the complete teaching approach presented within.

We believe an adequate exploration of this case study requires at least 3 hours of classroom coverage and/or discussion (assuming 50 minute per course meeting). The following is a general outline of topics and activities to help instructors successfully navigate this unique event segment.

Prior to first course meeting of the unit

1. Assign students to read the case study Planning a Cannabis Festival (pages 1-5) prior to when the unit is covered in class.
2. To both ensure students complete the reading, and to engage course discussion and participation, learners should complete the following prior to attending that first day of the unit:
 - a. Provide written answers to a minimum of three discussion questions posed on page 5.
 - b. Formulate three additional written questions based on the case study.
 - i. Best practice encourages students to ask “thought-provoking” questions that arose when completing the reading. Encourage students that “thought-provoking” questions don’t have readily apparent answers, especially nothing that can be immediately ascertained with the reading itself.
 - i. Best practice also encourages instructors require typewritten submissions ONLY, submitted at the BEGINNING of the first class period. This discourages procrastination and encourages time and effort is devoted to the assignment.

First course meeting of the unit

Daily learning goal – students explain and discuss the scope and scale of the event

1. **(1-5 min.)** Instructor collects written questions from students, and then opens up a general discussion of the case study. Learners are asked to share general thoughts and ideas of the case study reading, or the event itself.
2. **(20-25 min.)** Instructor begins covering each discussion topic from page 5. Since students already answered three questions prior to the start of class, discussion is much easier than when students are just asked to answer general questions during a lecture.
3. **(20 min.)** Instructor asks students to start sharing some of their original questions generated before the course session.

- i. Best practice encourages instructors to first pose the question to the class before adding their own thoughts or opinions. Simply asking “does anyone have thought on this” often generates responses.

4. **(Final 2 min.)** Remind students about the homework due at the beginning of the next course (explained next). Inform students that at the beginning of the next course meeting, they will form into groups and discuss the case study further (max 4 per group is ideal).

Prior to second course meeting of the unit

Students must identify as many event planning entities as possible that are specifically mentioned in the case study. This includes not only the event planner (TPP) and city officials, but also security, beer vendors, cannabis paraphernalia vendors, trash collection, etc.

Again, best practice dictates students complete this as a typewritten/printed assignment, with submissions collected after the first 10 min. of class (explained below).

Second course meeting of the unit

Daily learning goal – students identify micro-level components, analyzing their interconnectivity

1. **(10 min.)** Ask students to use their written assignment to help identify event planning entities specifically mentioned in the case. The instructor should capture this information on a whiteboard, chalkboard, doc cam, etc. where all students can see the information.
2. **(3 min.)** After part 1 is complete, students submit written assignment and form into groups (again, 4 max is ideal).
3. **(2 min.)** Instructor uses information captured in part 1 to assign each student group to an event planning entity. In smaller classes, it could be beneficial to either form pairs instead of groups, or assign multiple event planning entities to each group.
 - a. Best practice would specifically bypass assigning the larger entities to a group (e.g. the event planner, and the city).
- b. Instructors should also explain this assignment is designed to help students see things on a micro-level rather than trying to grasp ALL aspects of the event simultaneously. Successful event planning relies more on getting small details correct rather than simultaneously seeing and control the entire event. This is basically impossible in large events, which is why so many event planning entities are utilized in the first place.
4. **(10-15 min.)** Student groups identify the main objective(s) of assigned event planning entity.
 - a. They should briefly explain the logistics needed to achieve the objective.

a. They should also identify at least two major barriers to the success of each entity.

i. Example – a beer vendor is there to make money by selling beer. Some of their main logistics would be: keeping beer cold, sufficient number of cups, managing lines, staffing needs, physically taking payment (cash or credit), etc. Some of their major barriers would be: physical storage and moving of beer kegs, identifying intoxicated guests and refusing service to them, etc.

5. (Final 20 min.) Instructor leads a discussion where each group briefly shares the logistics and barriers from their event planning entities.

a. Best practice should leave a few minutes for students to identify when conflicts might exist between entities. This is a major takeaway from the day, so instructors should have already identified some potential conflicts in case students do not.

i. Example – Attendee safety is paramount. Thus, the need for metal detectors, and the laws against serving intoxicated guests. But if the event didn't have enough metal detectors or security on hand, attendees might attempt to bypass entry points and create an unsafe environment. Additionally, beer vendors could make more money by selling as many products as possible. But intoxicated guests tend to create more safety concerns.

Third course meeting of the unit

Daily learning goal – Understand event evaluation. Building on prior learning activities, students should begin to see a more complete macro-level picture of the case study. They can then formulate and quantify measures of overall success for the event.

1. (2 min.) Students form into groups (no more than 4) – ideally with different members than the second course meeting.

2. (5 min.) Hold a brief discussion about overall stakeholders, and their primary and secondary goals - The focus is on the big players now – the event planner (TPP), city organizers, and the event sponsor (Euflora).

a. Primary goals are readily apparent. They are the overall reason for holding the event.
b. Secondary goals are still very important, but not as easy to identify.

i. Example – As the event sponsor, Euflora pays a great deal of money for licenses and fees, and to TPP for planning the experience. They will lose money on the event. On 4/20/2018, their primary

goal was just to have a smooth running event. Success or failure is about great attendee participation and few (if any) major incidents. This goal is immediately measurable.

ii. One of their secondary goals is to increase over all revenue in their business. They sponsored the event to increase name recognition and hopefully increase future sales (remember, they could NOT sell cannabis products at the festival itself). It would be possible to achieve their primary goal, but NOT see an increase in future sales. Success or failure here is more about marketing and branding, and this goal is not immediately measurable. But it is the only reason they are willing to actually lose money by being the event sponsor.

3. (15 min.) Identify stakeholders and goals.

a. Student groups identify at minimum 2 primary goals for each of the big stakeholders.
b. Students also identify at minimum 2 secondary goals for each stakeholder.
c. Students identify specific and measurable ways to determine if each primary and secondary goal is met.

4. (10 min.) Students share their primary and secondary goals for each stakeholder.

5. (10-15 min.) Discuss the logistical concerns of accurately measuring goals.

a. The perfect example is always revenue versus customer satisfaction. Revenue is easy to calculate, and if a goal is set before the event, success or failure is clear cut. Customer satisfaction is very hard to measure. Attendees "seeming" happy is not a sufficient way to measure this goal, yet neither is some form of survey/feedback either during or after the event. Attendees don't want to answer questions during an event, or when they are trying to leave. So if students choose "attendees had a good time" as a goal, discuss how this is simultaneously critical to success, but also very difficult to measure specifically. Discuss ways in which this could be realistically and specifically measured.

6. (Last 5-7 min) Summarize the case study discussion for all three days and ask for and answer students questions.

Suggested Websites for Student Learning Activity

California Law Firm Event Guide for Cannabis Events. http://www.manzurilaw.com/events_new_regs

California Law Firm Event Guide for Cannabis Events. <http://www.omarfigueroa.com/overview-of-the-new-cannabis-event-organizer-license-in-california/>

City of Denver, CO Marijuana Business/Event Licensing Information. <https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/denver-business-licensing-center/marijuana-licenses/social-consumption-advisory-committee.html>

State of California License Information. https://bcc.ca.gov/licensees/event_organizer.html