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SO YOU WANT TO START A RENAISSANCE FAIRE v1.1

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FAQ: SO YOU WANT TO START A RENAISSANCE FAIRE v1.2

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This FAQ is being written in response to a question, which comes up frequently in the Renaissance Faire community--"My friends and I are following a dream. We want to start a Renaissance Faire. What next?" The essay below is an attempt to provide information, which will help you to answer that question. This document is a work in progress, and should be considered in no way definitive or the last word. It is not a "sole source" "single authority" document. It is guidance based on the vast experience of a variety of people associated with Renaissance Faires as patrons, workers, and managers. These people have been kind enough to provide their informed insights and comments. You may not agree with everything that is said, but you should pay close attention to it. In the long run, it normally works out better (and usually much cheaper) to learn from the experience of others than from your own. Ultimately, it is your time, effort, reputation, peace of mind, and/or money on the line.

You've been to a lot of Renaissance Faires and you are thinking to yourself "Gee, this is neat. This is fun. I could do this. I want to do this. Why don't I start a Renaissance Faire? How hard could it be?"

The answer to the last question is "Very!!". First and foremost, operating a Renaissance Faire successfully--or, indeed, any form of public entertainment venue--is very hard work. There are a lot of things that have to be done in order to have a successful Faire. In the final analysis, what you are getting into is the bloodthirsty, paper work ridden, permit infested, money-sucking hole of corporate event planning and promotion. It may (eventually) be successful, profitable, well attended, spiritual, and even fun. But at first, it will be horrific, expensive, dreary, complicated, and about as far from a feel-good gathering of friends as you can imagine. Good corporate sense makes good festivals--bad corporate sense--you know the rest. You don't have to be a money-grubbing jerk, but you can't run a Faire like a backyard party and have it be fun for anyone involved. If you or your friends can't handle or are unwilling to run a business--and Faire is a business, make no mistake--better go do something else. Starting a Renaissance Faire is not for you.

You have read the paragraph above, and are still determined to put on a Renaissance Faire. Here are some factors you need to consider:

I. WAIT BEFORE YOU LEAP

You have gone to Renaissance Faires; you have seen, but have you observed and analyzed, and for how long? And have you worked at them in any capacity? Before you start a Faire, it is advisable to wait a year or two or three and spend the time and money to go to as many Faires as possible--not for fun, but to observe and learn how things are done, or should not be not done, as the case might be. In particular, target Faires that you feel fit the parameters of what you plan to do. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions--it might later make the difference between success and failure. It is also recommended that you and your partners work at a Faire in more than one capacity--a boothie, maybe maintenance, definitely as a volunteer--to get a good idea of what is involved. Before you become management, it is well to know what it is like on the other side of the fence.

Also, do your best to interrogate as many people who work the Faires as possible. Talk to the merchants, the performers, the employees and cast. And definitely see about talking to the management. If you do not have the gumption it takes to just start asking folks you don't know hard questions about their business, you probably don't have what it takes to run a Faire.

Other good places for information are your local economic development center and possibly the SBA and SCORE. Hopefully there is a professional's organization in your area that relates to festivals or event organization. Unfortunately, there is not an organization for Renfaires, proper, but if you look around, you can probably find something that is related.

II. VISION

What is your vision for your Faire--one, five, ten years down the road? Where are you going to start? In what direction do you want to go? If you don't have a clear vision of where you are going, your chances of having a viable Faire are significantly reduced. Some factors to consider.

1) What is the actual "scope" of the Faire/Festival going to be? Is it going to be a "historical" Faire? If so, what time frame? Is it going to be "historically flavored"? Or is it going to be an outright "fantasy" Faire?

There is nothing wrong with any of these approaches, but if you fail to make a decision, it will muddy the waters and make it difficult to establish an identity, other than a costumed craft mall, to the outside world.

2) What size Faire do you want to be? How do you want to get there? There is no single good answer; it depends on circumstances and how much risk you are willing to take. To help you determine your vision in this area, see section IV below.

3) How do you see your entertainment/food/craft mix evolving over time? What do you want the "feel" of your Faire to be? How do you plan to get there?

III. BUSINESS AND FINANCE

To keep a Faire going, it all comes down to money and management. How much money do you need to start the Faire, and where is it going to come from? Do you bring in enough money to keep the Faire solvent; how are you going to manage the Faire so that you can do so? If the Faire doesn't pay for itself in a reasonable amount of time, or if it ceases to become a moneymaker and starts to lose money consistently, it will go away, sooner or later. Someone on your founding group (preferably, several someones) should have a firm grounding in professional business practices and personnel management. All of you should at least be

acquainted with the basics--you can find out how to get acquainted simply by contacting a local college or university with a good business school and ask for advice.

Just as an estimate, to get a full-sized Faire up and running, it is likely to require seed capital in the range of \$250,000. Most likely more. More than half of this will be spent before the Faire even opens, on putting in the infrastructure and doing the initial advertising. The rest will go to operating expenses for the first three to five years, until the Faire becomes self-supporting. This seed money, of course, is in addition to the fact that you will likely need to reinvest every penny you make for the first few years.

A) After you have developed your vision of what the Faire should be and how it should develop, but before you take any action to actually get it on its way, get your business plan in place. A good business plan development resource is www.inc.com. It also has lots of good links to other places to help you write a good business plan. Some considerations:

- 1) Is this a partnership or corporation? What type?
- 2) What are the managerial and/or fiduciary responsibilities of the "founding fathers" with regard to your Faire?
- 3) Do you have people on your management team capable of properly running a business of the size you envision? Do you have a good lawyer available to you? A good accountant? A good office manager? Adequate clerical help? If not, get them soonest.
- 4) What is your financial plan? Can you document clearly and accurately the premises on which the plan is based?
- 5) Have you thoroughly researched local, state, and federal ordinances and laws that might affect how you set up and run your operation? You had better have a clear plan for implementing these rules and a very educated estimate of what it will cost to do so.
- 6) Don't forget insurance. This is something that financial backers look at very closely when deciding to support a corporate event; without it, you are dead meat.

Once you have set up a coherent entity and a clear business plan, you can then start to talk to property owners, governmental institutions, and lending agencies and take the steps necessary to start your Faire. Most of these organizations aren't able to work with you if they don't have a cohesive, established entity to work with. Even if you do not plan to obtain funding from a bank, have your banker look over your business plan and get his opinion on it. This will give you some idea how the "real" world will respond to your business. Plus, he may have some good suggestions on things you have missed or that you could do differently.

B) After the Faire is a going concern, you have to continue to pay careful attention to how well it is run and how it is doing financially. It can't be left to run itself. Scrimping on business management expenses is a sure way to destroy a Faire. You have to continue to revise your business and financial plans on a frequent basis. Make sure you have contingency plans and contingency people in case something happens to key management/financial people. This is another case where you need to have someone on your management team who understands basic business practices and, in particular, how to plan for business success. One of the best things you can do is to keep a record of your original financial projections. These should run out at least three years, and it is best to do them for five years. Then as you go along, compare your actual financials to your original projections. In this way, it will be easier to revise your new projections from your actual statistics.

IV. TIME AND LOCATION

Your business plan is in place and you are ready to select a site for the Faire and the time of year. Do this carefully. Several considerations:

A) Where and when are potential competitors? While there is a dedicated core group of patrons who regularly make as many trips as they can to Faires, it is a relatively small group, probably less than one-tenth of one percent in any major metropolitan area, slightly higher in smaller areas (where there is less to do). Most patrons are either first timers or attend no more than once or twice a year. Starting a new Faire too close to a viable Faire of long standing is generally a fatal mistake. If you do it, you had better make sure that the local demographics will support it--and, even then, it would be a very wise choice to do it on dates that are as far in time as possible during the year from your competitor's Faire dates. If you are planning to start small--as a one-weekend a year Faire--make sure that you are not competing with a major traditional event in your area.

B) And, while we are on the subject, even if you don't have competition, make sure that the local demographics will support your Faire. Most states have a department of some sort which has this demographic information available as part of its goal of enticing new business into the state. If the demographics aren't there, neither will your Faire be, before too long. And be sure that you know what your demographics are. What types of people actually attend Faires? And we are not talking about your core group, but what is the mainstream demographic that attends Faires, and does your location support that?

C) Weather. It is difficult to perform in bad weather, and many patrons will not attend if they feel it is too hot, cold, or wet. Weather is a major factor in determining when you hold your Faire. Even in the best of circumstances, expect bad weather every so often--it is inevitable (and you'd best have some contingency plans). No time is perfect, but some are much worse than others.

D) How big to start? This is a controversial issue. Most Faires make the decision to start small and grow, but others decide to start off big. There are pros and cons for both points of view:

1) Starting small:

a) Pros

- (1) Smaller start-up costs,
- (2) Less financial risk,
- (3) More time to refine the vision,
- (4) Allows management to "grow" in experience at a slower pace.

b) Cons

- (1) Not as much of an image impact on customers,
- (2) Harder to get entertainment and merchants who want to make sure they get a good return on their time and investment and could likely be doing a bigger show in a different part of the country at the same time,
- (3) Perception (right or wrong) that management is less committed to success of Faire,
- (4) More difficult to get sponsors/financial backing,
- (5) Very difficult to change size once everyone gets in the "groove" of a particular way of doing business.

2) Starting big:

a) Pros:

- (1) Better image with the paying customers,
- (2) More impetus to try harder to make it,
- (3) Better and more efficient use of construction time and money,
- (4) Shows more commitment to potential co-workers (merchants, performers, cast, employees, etc.) and makes it easier to get them,
- (5) Appeals more to sponsors and investors.

b) Cons:

- (1) Larger start-up costs,
- (2) More financial risk,
- (3) More immediately demanding on management,
- (4) Less time to refine the vision; more pressure to "get it right the first time".

E) Lease the land or buy it? This too is controversial and depends on a number of factors, including local circumstances, the length of the Faire, and what other uses, if any, the land is to be put when the Faire is not going on. There are a number of solid arguments on both sides of the issue. Before you make this crucial decision, talk to managers of Faires on both leased and purchased land. Some Faires, notably the Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire, have used the Faire site for other entertainment venues between Faire seasons.

F) How long should your Faire be? This depends on a number of factors, including demographics, availability of funding, how your Faire is staffed (see section V below), and availability of your site. Most full Faires run anywhere from six to ten weekends, with seven or eight being the most common.

V. STAFFING

You can't have a Faire without staff to run it, staff to do the work. Some of the major issues include:

A) Management: What is your on-site and daily management team going to look like? What kind of efficient "mix" do you need to ensure that both the artistic and business angles are all taken care of? Are they going to be full-time or part-time during off-season and full-time during Faire season? Will they be there onsite during the run of the Faire? Who has what authority and what responsibility? --CRITICAL--you HAVE to define this clearly or you risk serious and frequent management problems. How do you handle conflicts between the management team? --And, yes, it will happen, even in the best of circumstances. Be sure in your business plan to have an organizational chart and stick to it.

B) Volunteers vs. Paid Staff: This is an issue you and your management team have to face early and head-on. Experience in both the Faire and non-profit venues suggest that you cannot operate successfully over the long term solely with volunteers. (Generally, and you will find this out the hard way, it takes seven volunteers to have an 80% chance of getting one job done.) Most Faires have a mix of both. The degree to which you used volunteer and paid staff depends on a number of factors, to include:

1) How "sexy" the job is. Your "royalty" or some of your musical entertainment might volunteer; getting very many volunteers to pick up trash or clean up after the Faire day is over is problematical at best.

2) How long your Faire is. Someone might be able to volunteer for the full run of a short Faire, but may very well not be available for the full run of a long one, which leads to:

3) How critical the function is. What happens if the person is not there? The more critical the billet, the more essential it is to have some string on the person--i.e. a paycheck--to guarantee they are there. And don't confuse "visibility" with "essential". For example, it is doubtful that your highest "royalty" is more important to your Faire than an effective manager of your food services, or even the trash haulers.

4) Can you get the function performed in the way you want it for free?

C) Volunteers: All Faires have some volunteers. Once you have determined where you are going to use them, you have to manage them intelligently. You should have a volunteer coordinator to manage your volunteer program. How do you manage volunteers? To find out

more about this, it is recommended that you contact nearby large museums/historic ships/other large non-profits to find out how they do it. There is also considerable literature on this subject, some of which can be obtained from the American Association of Museums, 1575 Eye Street, NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005, E-Mail: bookstore@www.aam-us.org. One thing you have to remember: Volunteers are not free, contrary to popular opinion. It takes time and resources to manage them effectively and keep their services. Implementation of a Guild system similar to that seen in the California Faire might be worth considering in this regard.

D) Paid Staff. You have to have some paid staff. Handling this issue properly is one of your most critical management tasks, because, if for no other reason, at most Faires this is such a major expense. How many paid staff do you need; how many do you need to pay directly, how many do you get on contract? Note that the recent changes in IRS contract labor laws make it very dicey to use contract labor. Check with your local IRS agent for more information. One difficult issue is determining what type of person is the most cost-efficient choice to perform a particular function. As an example, the New York Renaissance Faire has found it more efficient to hire fewer, older, better-paid people to work the grounds (i.e., garbage and janitorial staff) than hiring twice the number of younger, cheaper workers. There are no hard and fast rules about hiring paid staff; it depends on your circumstances. Just remember that this is not a simple process.

E) Staff Training. How are you going to train your staff? Long-term? Short-term? This is particularly important for the performers. Will you have an apprenticeship program that pays little to nothing but "develops" actors so that you always have potential good performers for the main ensemble? Are you going to use a Guild system? How does it work? Who oversees it? How are you going to ensure that your staff knows what to do, how to do it, and when to do it? Particularly important for a historical Faire is ensuring that the staff knows the proper techniques for dialect, character development, improvisation, and interaction. This training is invaluable for those who have not already performed at a Renaissance Faire and helps create the proper atmosphere. Normally, training should be on site to help the performers feel their character and help them to get the feel of and interact with the site on which they will be performing. Staff also needs to be trained to avoid certain non-period behaviors (such as smoking cigarettes) and visibly using non-period equipment such as watches and zippers to the point where it becomes automatic on site. Schooling should not be limited to the actors, but also include the merchants and staff as well. It would be nice if even the guy who empties the trash barrels during the run of the show had an acceptable Basic Faire Accent.

VI. THE OTHER STUFF

Now you have your land, you have your dates, you have your staffing plan. You now have to flesh out the Faire itself. There are a number of considerations here. What is listed below is by no means comprehensive, but illustrates the kinds of issues that must be dealt with, and some idea of how complex they can get:

A) Costumes. This is a particularly interesting example of a complex issue. If you are a historical Faire, how accurate are you going to insist the participants' costume be in fulfilling that vision? Costume approvals? Provide costumes for acts like the Mayor, Nobles, and Royal Court? For street (improv) acts? What about for the headliners you contract to work your venue, many of who don't seem to care about historical accuracy but have good visual impact? What about Faire workers--food staff, maintenance, security? Will costumes be provided? If you contract out certain operations, will you provide costumes to the employees or will the contractors? Will you give a costume allowance and insist that costumes pass approval by your

designated staff? What do you do if costumes don't pass? What sort of emergency provisions will you set to have "something" on hand to ensure you have enough staff to work the gates, sell the food, hawk the games, or whatever? If you decide the participants/workers must be costumed and at a certain acceptable level, you had better be prepared to have a range of lendable costumes available, whether they are part of the employee's compensation or considered a rental. How will you staff your costume shop? How much on-site assistance will there be in costume repair/maintenance if you do provide costumes for some/all of your staff? What mechanisms will you have in place to check out costumes to participants and GET THEM BACK at the end of the season? How will inventory be handled? Storage of costumes between seasons? Replacements? Disposition of unneeded costumes?

B) Food Services:

1) What are you going to serve? Food at Faire has to walk a fine line. On the one hand, if too much of the food offered is "exotic" (i.e., it doesn't look like what the patrons normally eat), you have a lot of irritated patrons who are going to leave early because the "regular" food lines were too long and little Johnny or Becky wouldn't even try the exotic stuff ("eewww, Mom, that food's too weird!!"); they are, as a result, impossible to live with. On the other hand, if all you sell are food items identical to those that can be picked up at the McDonalds or Burger King just down the street for (inevitably) less money, patrons will not be impressed. Food at Faire has to be a mix of tasty items which include the (at least mildly) exotic (you have to search to find it on the outside without making it yourself) and some foods which are recognized as edible and desirable by all.

2) Who prepares it? Are you going to contract out "all" the food operations? If so, to whom? If you are going to establish your own kitchens, will that be a separate company or simply part of your primary corporation/partnership? Insurance?

C) Marketing. Far and away the most important thing to a successful Faire. What are you going to do to publicize your Faire? Do you pay a professional ad agency or hire local college students majoring in Marketing to design your ad campaign? Television, print, radio, web, billboards? Who and where is your target market? Again, do you know the demographics? The best return on advertising investment is achieved through what sort of marketing strategy?

1) Make sure you have someone truly competent to monitor this function. If people don't know about the Faire, they won't come.

2) The most important thing to remember is that, almost without exception, all of those myths about all the free advertising you can get are urban legends. Complete untruths. You will have literally dozens of people coming to you and saying, "Hey, if you do this-and-such, you can get some free advertising on that-and-so." Immediately ask them, "Have you ever done that? Do you actually know anyone who has?"

3) You can sometimes get some free promotion, but usually it is in conjunction with some paid advertising. Often you will need to offer something in return for consideration from in advertiser.

4) Cross-promotion is a good way to go and can really stretch your advertising dollars, but it is also a two-way street. You can sometimes work out deals with local retailers to work some ad deals with you where you share the cost. And you can usually get them to put out flyers and/or posters in their shops.

5) Remember that free or reduced cost cross-promotion, while saving you money, is very time-intensive. It will generally take about five times as many person-hours to get the same effect as it would with a good, fully-paid ad campaign.

6) "Buzz", of course, is the by-word these days. Generating good buzz is extremely effective and extremely difficult. Even the masters are unsure how to do it, but it can be done. Sometimes it just happens accidentally, but most of the time you just have to keep trying

different things until it pops up. Getting the people talking about you, making yourself into something "cool" can really make your event.

7) Here are some other short suggestions:

- a) talk to your local public radio or TV station about sponsorship or volunteer options
- b) always, always, always donate tickets to charity auctions
- c) use lots of pictures in your promotional materials
- d) send costumed characters to local events/conventions
- e) check with your local theaters
- f) find your local SCA and other live-action role-playing groups and make sure they know about you
- g) prepare a nice media packet, not just a press release, to get to all your local media
- h) use lots of pictures
- i) divide the number of flyers you print by at least 100, this is the actual number of people they might bring in, more likely it will be 1 for every 300
- j) keep good records of everything you do and how well it works

D) Security. Is Security contracted out? Hired in-house? If contracted, does your insurance cover claims against the contract personnel? If you hire your own, what are your standards, who does training, how many do you need? How are they clothed? Give careful consideration to this last, because when Security is needed, they are needed now!!! They must be clearly visible to even the most unobservant patron.

E) Medical. You have to have personnel readily available to handle medical emergencies. Local paramedics on volunteer duty for a free admission? Paid staff? Contracted? What about major medical emergencies that require immediate intervention and rapid removal of the victim to the hospital? Do you have the means to land a Medevac helicopter in the immediate area of the Faire? Can you get an ambulance "into" the grounds to a victim within the critical time? What about medical insurance and training for your staff to ensure that they know what to do in case of a medical emergency?

F) Merchants. What and how are you going to charge your merchants for the privilege of selling their wares at your Faire? Are you going to have your merchants juried? Who are your judges and what are their qualifications? Do merchants have to "re-jury every year or are they grandfathered in once approved? Is there a civil means to remove a juried merchant who has let their quality and selection fall below your current standards for new applicants? How will you ensure a varied selection? Will you require shops for all merchants or will you permit pushcarts and/or tents? What are the standards for the latter two? If merchants are required to build shops, how is that financed?

G) Facilities. What kind of facilities are you going to construct--permanent or temporary or a combination? What are you going to need in the long and short term to meet your vision? Will you allow your merchants to live in the shops? Any accommodations for staff (showers, camping, etc.)? How will you ensure compliance with local codes?

H) Patron rules. What are your rules for patron behavior? How do you diplomatically communicate them to your patrons? How do you deal with clothing (or lack thereof) issues? Are weapons allowed--if so, what, and under what circumstances? How do you handle unruly patrons? What are your rules about animals? How do you deal with issues involving alcohol? Very important--what do local ordinances say about what rules can/must be implemented and how rules can be enforced?

And thus endeth this FAQ. Go forth with the knowledge thou hopefully hath gained and establish thy Faire to be a beacon upon a hill and an example upon which all wilt look in awe and to which many will flock!!!

Editor's (Norm's) Notes:

I got a number of useful comments from a number of people on this. However, there were some who played a major role in providing input and putting my thought processes in certain directions. I think those are the ones that should be listed. These include:

Morghana

James Echols

The Shrew

John Hidalgo

Joni Massengale

Allison Williams

Members of the Historic Naval Ships Association

Members of the SCRIBE Network