



# Asking questions helps ensure

*Organizers often choose an event as an extension activity without considering whether another extension tool may better meet the defined goals. Organizers should ask: Why is an event needed instead of an alternate approach? Is an event the most effective way of achieving these goals?*

by Robin Pike, Research Branch, BC Ministry of Forests and Range

Designing effective events is key and in this era of reducing our carbon footprint, organizers must make extra efforts to ensure their event is worth the trip.

Effective events clearly define what will be achieved and have well-developed strategies. For many organizers, event planning focuses on logistical details (e.g., venue, registration, etc.) and agenda development. Yet, perhaps the most critical first step is defining the event's purpose and objectives.

This article presents a series of key questions to consider when planning an event. Whether the event is an international symposium or a two-hour conference call, the answers to these questions will ensure organizers and participants clearly understand why the event is needed and what it will achieve. The questions focus on the three main stages of event development: (1) developing a rationale for the event; (2) defining the target audience; and (3) planning the event.

## Developing a Rationale for the Event

When individuals and groups come together to plan an event, there is usually a high level of enthusiasm, and with this comes an immediate focus on planning the event's tangibles—its whos, whats, wheres, and hows. There are, however, five basic questions that should be discussed before event planning begins:

- Why are we doing this?
- Has this been done before?
- Who else is working on the issue?
- Why an event?
- Should additional extension products be produced?

## Why are we doing this?

Fundamental to developing the event strategy is discussing and agreeing on the problem or problems the event is suppose to address or solve. In other words, "Why are we doing this?" The result of this discussion is one to two high-level goals, which are broad, often intangible statements that generally cannot be validated (in contrast to objectives, which are narrowly focused, concrete statements that can be easily evaluated). Once in place, these goals become the centerpiece of the

event announcement from which participants can decide if the event suits their needs. Asking "Why?" allows the organizing committee to clearly outline their expectations, which is critical when multiple partners, with different reasons for participating, are organizing an event. Being able to justify and clearly communicate the "why" of the event is not only important for successful event planning, but is also important for attracting external sponsorship and, ultimately, speakers and participants.

## Has this been done before?

More likely than not, the topic has been addressed in some capacity by past events. An important question then is: How distinct is this event from others that have occurred or are currently being planned? Other questions to ask are: Are there lessons that can be learned from these past events? Will this event address distinct needs that the other events could not, or did not, address? These questions are important to consider as they will help to avoid duplication, build on past lessons learned, and focus on outstanding or unresolved topic areas.

## Who else is working on this issue?

Identifying other groups that may be providing similar information or associated information is another key issue. Organizers should ask the following questions: Who are these groups and are they aware of the event being planned? If similar events are planned, can they be combined or must they be kept separate? How open is the committee to collaborating and possibly including views from others that might be contrary to current information? The answers to these questions are key to reducing duplication and, more importantly, to evaluating whether or not partnering with others is possible.

## Why an event?

Organizers often choose an event as an extension activity without considering whether another extension tool may better meet the defined goals. Organizers should ask: Why is an event needed instead of an alternate approach? Is an event the most effective way of achieving these goals? Is it the preferred extension method of the targeted audience? Will people attend or, are other extension methods more appropriate? If the answer to the question is "Because it is in my workplan," further discussion is likely warranted.



# effective and efficient events

## Should additional extension products be produced?

If an event is indeed the appropriate method, should another extension tool be added (e.g., web page, CD, summary article, video presentation, proceedings, etc.)? Only a portion of those people targeted will be able to attend the planned event, and diversifying extension methods allows those who cannot attend to benefit as well. Additional extension products also increase the longevity of the information presented. If organizers agree that secondary products are required, they should then discuss whether the resources are available to produce them (e.g., time, money, expertise).

## Target Audience Definition

Once a rationale has been developed, a more focused discussion on the target audience and their needs can occur. Most often organizers will discuss these points as they answer the first five questions. These next four questions include:

- Who is the target audience?
- What information does the audience need and want?
- What are the barriers to success?
- How open are the participants to an event?

## Who is the target audience?

Perhaps the second most important question for the strategy is: Who is the target audience? Determining who the event is for is a critical and often overlooked part of event planning. A formal declaration of the target audience should occur prior to defining the objectives. This discussion allows organizers to cross-check answers to the questions “Why an event?” and “Why are we doing this?” The discussion also helps identify key people who might attend the event.

## What information does the audience need and want?

Once the target audience is defined, organizers can ask questions that allow them to be more specific about information needs, such as: “Do we know what information the audience wants on the topic? What do we think they need to know (that they may not realize they need to know)? Are these assumptions valid or have they been recently validated?”

In some instances, some early investigative work is needed to determine the answers to these questions (e.g., needs assessment, pre-workshop surveys, and (or) contact with key informants from the

target audience). Organizing an event that directly addresses the target audience’s information needs greatly increases the likelihood of success.

## What are the barriers to success?

While the needs of the audience may be easy to define, there may be several barriers to addressing these needs. Is your audience receptive to your message or information? Do they trust your information? Are they willing to share information? Is a facilitator needed? Do members of the target audience have time to attend the event? The event strategy should define measures to overcome or deal with barriers that may limit the event’s effectiveness.

## How open are the participants to an event?

Once the audience and its specific needs and barriers are known, revisiting whether or not an event is the most appropriate approach for them is an important step. Will people attend if they know their beliefs will be challenged or if they believe the information will not be provided in an objective manner? Will people see benefit in attending the event? If those concerns have grounds, how will the organizers entice participation to meet the event goals and objectives?

## Event Planning

After defining the “why” and “for whom” questions, event planning can address the more traditional questions:

- What are the key objectives?
- Who are the key presenters?
- What level of peer review is required?
- Who can contribute resources?
- What are the project milestones and timelines?

## What are the key objectives?

Only after the previous nine questions have been addressed should organizers define the event objectives. To do this, the following questions should be asked: As a result of the event, what will be different? What are the specific things participants will be able to do differently? Will they have new skills? Changed knowledge? Will the event eventually lead to changed behaviours? What do the organizers wish to give the audience (e.g., the draft agenda)? Expressing event objectives in concrete,

...continued on page 24

# Asking questions helps ensure effective events

... continued from page 23

measurable, and tangible statements is the first step in establishing the event's evaluation. Objectives should embody the results of what has been discussed and learned through answering the previous nine questions. Carefully crafted objectives are also important for presenters who need them to tailor their presentations, and to the participants who need to know what they can expect.

## Who are the key presenters?

Armed with an interim strategy, organizers can find presenters and targeted presentations to help develop the agenda. At this point, organizers need answers to questions such as: Who are the key collaborators? Who should be involved and what are their respective roles? Do they understand the purpose of the event and will they tailor their presentation to support the objectives? Can they help address the objectives? In working with presenters, event objectives are often modified based on their feedback.

## What level of peer review is required?

Events are often used to increase participant knowledge on issues of importance. Depending upon the urgency of these issues and the solutions required, content usually spans several levels of peer review from fully reviewed research and predictive models to unreviewed interim research results and (or) modelling scenarios. Depending on how participants will use the information, it may be important to make known the level of peer review or state the limitations of presented information.

## Who else can contribute resources?

At this stage of the planning, organizers must quickly review potential partners and sponsors who might share the event's vision. Questions to ask are: Are all the required resources for the event available and if not, who else can contribute time and funding? This information allows organizers to quickly create a preliminary budget for the event and secondary products, based on previous events or estimated costs.

## What are the project milestones and timelines?

The final step is to ensure the timelines of planned activities and required dates of completion are realistic. A common pitfall is to allow insufficient time for presenters and volunteers; organizers must ensure that targets are tangible and achievable in the allocated time period.

## Summary

Events can serve as important milestones or turning points in the long-term development of resource management. Workshops, conferences, conference calls, and meetings are commonly used as extension activities. In the author's experience, while the questions presented in this article may take one or two hours to answer, they will ultimately save time and effort, and ensure a high level of success.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the following individuals for their input on earlier versions of this article: **Jane Perry**, **Rick Guthrie**, **Alan Wiensczyk**, and **Kathie Swift**. Their collective comments greatly improved this article. 