Con Confidence

Organizing your first community event? Experts weigh in with seven common mistakes to avoid.

By Rikki Kite

RIKKI KITE

Rikki Kite is Associate Publisher of *Linux Pro Magazine, Linux Magazine,* and *Ubuntu User.* When she's not representing the magazines at open source events, Rikki blogs about Women in Open Source at *linuxpromagazine.com/roseblog.* Email your community updates and announcements to her at: *rkite@linuxpromagazine.com.*

More than a dozen industry events are posted on our calendar for the month of April [1]. The First Annual Northeast GNU/LinuxFest is listed among older, well-respected events such as LinuxFest Northwest. This month, I've rounded up a collection of seven deadly sins event organizers should avoid.

1. Thinking Too Big. "When you're surrounded by other pumped-up people who want to make it happen, it is easy to get carried away with expectations," says Jeremy Sands, SouthEast LinuxFest organizer. "Be modest. Start your first year at a college campus where the cost will be near zero," he says.

2. Lack of Organization. "Having good project management skills to keep track of what needs doing by when is important," says John Van Ostrand, Ontario Linux Fest Conference founder and organizer. "We found ourselves rushing to complete some things that we could have done earlier," he says.

3. Poor Communication. Good communication seems obvious, but it's not so easy to achieve when you are in the throes of throwing together a conference. "We didn't communicate enough with our attendees," Von Ostrand says. "Prior to the event, we had numerous questions regarding details that we could have expressed in well-timed emails," he says.

Communication with exhibitors is also important. "Exhibitor packages were another thing we didn't have ready in time. They often need to know about Internet access options, power, extra furniture, shipping/receiving options, move-in/out times," he says.

4. Not "Enough" Bandwidth. "We didn't have sufficient bandwidth our first year and we got a lot of feedback about it," says Sherri Konin Montgomery, Open Source Bridge organizer. "This and areas for people to plug to recharge laptops are a big need," she says.

A. L. Spehr, co-founder of KDE's BugSquad, says that events should have their own WiFi repeaters.

Don Marti, former conference chair for Open Source World, reminds us that it's a conference, not a wireless café. "A good 'hallway track' and crappy wireless is better than the other way around," he says. "There will never be *enough bandwidth* since there will always be some jackass who decides to do an `apt-get dist-upgrade` during the keynote."

5. No Backups. Peter H. Salus, event speaker and author of *A Quarter Century of UNIX* [2], recommends that you have extra plug adapters and laptops on hand and tell speakers to bring their backup presentations on a stick or DVD. "Have at least one back-up speaker," he says. "Someone will be snowed in, have a baby, suffer food poisoning, or fall down an escalator. I experienced all of these in my years," he says.

6. Insufficient Marketing. "We spent a lot of time getting the word out to traditional forms of advertising, but failed to lure in enough bloggers and podcasters," Van Ostrand says.

Salus agrees, saying, "If you get your PR out, folks'll come."

7. Overlooking Details. Little details, such as starting an event too early, not providing beverages during breaks, not giving speakers enough transition time, or a bad registration system that doesn't allow you to follow up with attendees can cause bigger problems.

"They really need a time keeper so that the next speaker can get set up and start on time," says Karlie Robinson, event speaker and owner of Webpath Technologies. "Signs must be in large sans serif type. Clear is better than handsome," Salus says.

"Actually, most community events do a way better job with everything than the big-budget events," says Don Marti. "The main problem I see is with overestimating people's short-term memory and not putting up enough signs and maps," he adds. ∎∎∎

LIKEABLE LINKS

[1] Linux New Media event calendar: *http://www.linuxpromagazine.com/Resources/Event-Calendar*

[2] Salus, Peter H. *A Quarter Century of UNIX.* Addison-Wesley, 1994