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**PLANNING 101**

## 12 Steps to Organize a Successful Marathon

By Dawn Reiss

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It's one thing to run a marathon, and another to organize one as a race director. Many organizers say new planners have no idea what it takes—either in terms of money, time, talent or infrastructure—to pull off a major event like a 26.2-mile race that takes over a city. “The greatest skill set race directors can have is surrounding themselves with people who are more experienced than themselves,” says Dave McGillivray, race director of the [Boston Marathon](#) for the past 29 years. “You have to think of yourself as more of a conductor than a race director, and your team is your orchestra.” We talked to several successful marathon organizers to get their tips on running an expert event.

### **1. Start fast with marketing.**

“Most races don’t put enough money into marketing. They think the running community is just looking for another race and using word of mouth is good enough,” says Shawn Verhoff, co-race director of Cincinnati’s [Flying Pig Marathon](#), who has organized 24 marathons. “The supply is outpacing the demand right now. When you are first starting an event and assuming people will come to it, it’s never a good thing.”

### **2. Get early buy-in from city officials and the public.**

Directors say it is essential to get public buy-in from the beginning. “If the police department has a say in where the course goes, as opposed to the department of commerce, you’re going to be better off,” says Verhoff, who runs his own event management company, Elmwood Consulting. “You need to get buy-in from people on the ground. They need to feel like it’s their idea also.”

### **3. Start planning sooner than you think.**

Depending on the city or parks and recreation or police department, planning and obtaining permits may take as long as 18 months to two years to get buy-in, Verhoff says.

### **4. Develop an extensive community outreach program.**

Among other things, make sure the public is aware of what roads will be shut down to prevent problems on race day. “If you eliminate the element of surprise through an extensive community outreach program then everyone gets along,” says McGillivray. “If you don’t, it’s going to be difficult to get the permit again.”

## **5. Get marathoners to participate in multiple races.**

Gone are the days of hosting only a marathon. Most running events have a 5K, half marathon, kids' race and other events. In Cincinnati, the Flying Pig Marathon plays off its sponsor Skyline Chili's heritage with a 3-Way Challenge that includes an extra medal for participants running the 5K and 10K on Saturday and the half marathon on Sunday; the 4-Way Challenge for those who run a 5K, 10K and marathon; or the 4-Way Challenge with Extra Cheese for runners who add on a 1-mile beer series run on Friday night.

## **6. Make the event all-inclusive.**

Race directors say it's important to get local community members involved with activities for participants of all abilities. The Boston Marathon has mobility-impaired, men's and women's push-rim wheelchair races as well as a division for handcycles and duos. In Cincinnati, in addition to races for kids and dogs, the PigAbilities is a 1-mile "walk, roll or stroll" during the final mile of the marathon. In Ogden, Utah, to get more locals involved, the mayor hosts a leisure 1-mile "Mayor's Walk" on Friday night before the Zions Bank Ogden Marathon through a promenade, concluding with the mayor handing out commemorative coins. "We wanted everyone to get engaged in the event," says Mike McBride, operations manager for the GOAL Foundation and race director for Zions Bank Ogden Marathon.

## **7. You don't always have to pay for volunteers.**

While many marathons like the Flying Pig pay nonprofit groups to send volunteers, that doesn't have to be the case. In Ogden, McBride says all 16 aid stations are run by local nonpaid volunteers from churches, high school athletic groups and nonprofit organizations. McBride pays for about 30 people on the security and production teams.

## **8. Get creative with aid stations.**

Each aid station at the Ogden marathon is themed. Some volunteers dress like pirates, others like Teletubbies. There's even a pancakes-and-bacon station. "It's at mile 23 and you come out of the canyon and can just smell it," says McBride.

## **9. Security protocols have changed for everyone.**

The 2013 Boston Marathon bombing changed everything for races. “Five or six years ago, you didn’t see SWAT members around. Not every race had bomb-sniffing dogs like you do now,” Verhoff says. “We now have a SWAT team at the event. People value their presence. They come in full tactical gear. People take pictures with them and they treat it as a great way to engage with the community.” Likewise, have a huge medical presence just in case.

## **10. Up the ante for medical teams.**

More people are competing in marathons, and many have trained less than participants in the past—one of the likely reasons injuries lowered the number of finishers in 2015. “If you have too many of those it can be overwhelming,” says McGillivray. He suggests hiring trained medical personnel who understand how to triage on a course, which is different from an emergency room.

## **11. There’s a large no-show factor.**

Despite marathons selling out at record paces, every race director needs to consider a large no-show factor when purchasing race-day supplies like water, food and medals. For Boston, the marathon no-show rate is 8 to 10 percent, but for the half marathon, it’s about 22 percent, says McGillivray. McBride says there’s nearly a 20 percent no-show rate for Ogden’s marathon. The one caveat: international racers. “We have a 100 percent commitment from racers who come from abroad,” he says.

## **12. Track and document key findings.**

When the GOAL Foundation took over managing Ogden’s marathon in 2006, McBride wasn’t given an organizing book. Instead, he created his own. He now documents every lesson learned each year in a book—physical and digital formats—with more than 300 pages, and annually updates it with key contacts, time frames and details.