

Overview

FERN's INNOvation grant project was FERN Talks & Eats, a live, immersive, food and storytelling event held before a sold-out audience of 250 people in Brooklyn, New York on November 3, 2014.

During the event, four of our reporters delivered compelling spoken stories on topics they've covered. The event took place in the dramatic Green Building, a former brass foundry near the Gowanus Canal, and the stories were matched with a delicious array of small-plate dishes from some of New York City's most notable chefs. Participating chefs included Peter Endriss of Runner & Stone, Richard Kuo of Pearl & Ash, Seamus Mullen of Tertulia, Franny Stephens of Franny's, and Jason Weiner of Almond Restaurant. The evening featured singers, dancers, actors and shadow puppets, and was capped by a conversation between FERN Editor-in-Chief Samuel Fromartz and renowned chef and author Dan Barber.

Michelle Nijhuis kicked off the evening's spoken words, recounting the mystery of Paddlefish caviar smuggling centered in the Ozarks of Missouri. Nijhuis reported on this topic for us in her story, "Caviar's Last Stand," published on Medium. After, a dish of striped bass crudo with sustainable Paddlefish roe, created by Richard Kuo of Pearl and Ash, was passed to the audience.

Tracie McMillan followed, with a story of picking garlic and living with farmworkers in California. McMillan has reported for us on food stamps for *Mother Jones* and farmworker wage theft for *The American Prospect*, for which she won a James Beard Foundation award in 2013. Her riveting account was complemented by a garlic soup and grissini by Mary Cleaver of The Green Table.

Maryn McKenna told of her visit to a sustainable and humane farm in Georgia, to see how "chickens become chicken." McKenna has reported on antibiotics for us for *Modern Farmer*, *Medium*, and ABC News. After the hushed account, the audience dined on coq au vin with celery root puree and braised greens by Jason Weiner of the restaurant Almond.

Lisa Hamilton wrapped up the evening's stories, telling of a Hmong immigrant in Fresno who grew her special New Year's rice--and the dilemma it posed for a drought-stricken region. Hamilton has written about quinoa for us for *Harper's*

magazine. Arroz con leche by chef Seamus Mullen of Tertulia complemented the talk.

For the finale of the evening, FERN Editor-in-chief Sam Fromartz spoke with Dan Barber about farms, grains, and the breads we've lost--subjects tackled recently in Dan's *The Third Plate* and Fromartz's book, *In Search of the Perfect Loaf*. Served along side the talk was a homemade farro cracker with fall vegetables by Franny's restaurant and breads by baker Peter Endriss of Runner & Stone.

Process

To mount this event, FERN needed to retain event planning and creative production services. Core staff involvement was required to interface with the event planner, the creative team, and the promotional team. Because FERN was creating a new model for a live event and executing it for the first time -- and because FERN Editor-in-chief was participating in the event, core staff had significant involvement.

Planning began in earnest in June involving the venue search. Design of the event branding and website took place through July and August, as did creative development. The participating chefs were secured in August. A teaser website went up in the beginning of August. The full FERN Talks & Eats website launched and ticket sales began on September 15. Sponsorship sales took place during this period as well led by FERN Executive Director Tom Laskawy.

Our main promotional campaign began in October, which involved street marketing locally in Brooklyn, paid and donated ads on food-related newsletters, ads in our print media partner, Edible Publications, a paid ad in Time Out New York, and broadcast ads by our broadcast media partner, WNYC radio. During October, we also secured and finalized the caterer and provided logistical support to them, along with the chefs. Pre-production, involving all the logistics of the event itself, i.e. technical requirements, rentals, rehearsals, etc., occurred primarily in the latter half of October.

Evaluation

We looked at a variety of metrics to measure success.

- Venue selection: We exceeded our expectation in the venue selection. The Green Building was an ideal location for an event that combined storytelling and food and added to the overall ambiance.
- Talent selection: We featured a diverse group of highly talented writers that represented our first choices for participation. In addition, our “guest star,” Dan Barber, is one of the highest profile chefs working in America today. His involvement significantly increased our visibility and generated interest from several sponsors.
- Planning milestones: We met all planning milestones. The event came together on time and went off on the evening itself without a hitch.
- Corporate and media sponsors/partner: This was an area where we exceeded expectations. We planned on securing a single paying corporate sponsor at the \$5,000 level. For a small organization with an event with no track record, we thought this a prudent path. However, we secured the following sponsorships:

Paid Sponsorships:

Organic Valley (\$5,000)

Annie’s Natural Foods (\$5,000)

Stonyfield Organics (\$1,500 plus product donation)

Media sponsors:

Edible Publications (Print)

WNYC (Broadcast)

In-kind:

NY Distilling Company (Liquor/cocktails)

Fleisher Meats (chicken)

Sovereign Cider (hard cider)

All sponsors reported satisfaction with the event and interest in participating in future events. In addition, we contacted several sponsors that were very interested in the event but had committed all their marketing funds for the calendar year. They encouraged FERN to contact them for future events.

- Branding: We significantly raised our profile in New York as a result of this event. Potential partners, such as WNYC, as well as a large broadcast and print audience were exposed to our marketing materials. Even if they did not all attend the event, this broader audience is now aware of FERN as a brand.
- Ticket sales: We sold 77 tickets during our “Early Bird” sales period at \$65 per ticket, 99 tickets at the standard price of \$75 per ticket and 23 VIP tickets at \$200 per ticket. We also “sold” tickets to sponsors as part of their sponsorship fee. We had to suspend ticket sales on the day of the event when we “sold” all the tickets for the number of people we were able to feed, thus the sell out. We consider ticket sales to have exceeded expectation as we did not expect to sell out.
- Donor Infrastructure: We gained over 150 emails via ticket sales. In addition, the VIP tickets attracted several major donors and gave FERN Executive Director the opportunity to interact with them. Several major donor leads have also come out of the event.
- Budget/Profitability: During the course of the event, we realized that our food and travel expenses were going to come in much higher than estimated. We determined that, since the food experience was central to the concept and, as we knew from past experience, disappointment with food options can significantly affect attendees attitudes toward an event, we would need to invest resources into that area.

In addition, because we decided not to limit ourselves to New York-based writers, we exceeded budgeted amounts for travel. We also faced higher than expected costs for design/branding. However, we knew that establishing a brand with FERN Talks & Eats might require investment that could also be applied to future events. And while the total cost of \$84,000 exceeded our budgeted cost of \$60,000, we also exceeded our revenue estimate by 10%, reaching \$66,000. We also made the calculated decision not to increase ticket prices as the potential for a marginal increase in revenue was offset by the risk of pricing too many people out of the event.

Audience Survey

The results of our audience survey, conducted using Survey Monkey the week after the event, were very promising. 75% of respondents rated the event good or excellent overall, with each element of the event -- the stories, the food, the drink and the music/performances -- garnering equivalently positive ratings.

We also learned that attendees thought each element that we presented contributed equally to their overall experience, with the music/performances, while still positively received, slightly less so than than the other elements. Most interestingly, when attendees bought their ticket, the most appealing aspect to them was, overwhelmingly, “the prospect of a unique experience” -- 75% responded that it was “very appealing,” the highest rating offered.

Almost 60% of attendees agreed that the ticket price was “just right.” Crucially, 85% of attendees were likely to recommend FERN Talks & Eats to a friend, with over one in five respondents “extremely likely” and another third “very likely.”

The survey results tell us very clearly that we delivered on the event from the perspective of the audience experience -- a fun, unique evening of stories and performances about food with excellent food and drink.

Conclusions

While we were very happy overall with the outcome of FERN Talks and Eats, we also believe that we must address certain organizational and structural issues going forward.

The process to design, produce and promote the event was challenging. To ensure that we had a result that adequately represented the FERN brand, we were not inclined to give the event planner and creative team full control over the event. We also needed at least one core staff-member who had a full understanding of food and our content to oversee the process. At the same time, given our own staff constraints, it was challenging to devote one person to oversee all the related tasks.

But distributing authority and tasks also caused some communications issues with our contractors and writers.

The challenges for promoting the event were several. Most significantly, this was a first time event that required a great deal of effort in educating partners as to

how to position and explain the event. Because of time pressures, we did not have final content until very close to the event itself (typical for performance events, but atypical for the kinds of panel/policy events we have done in the past). Having now produced the event, we can much more easily describe it -- and have materials forthcoming, including a highlights reel and videos of the individual performances, that will allow us to show rather than tell.

We very clearly learned how to mount a large performance event, which requires a much greater staff than anything we'd ever attempted. We also established that there is a market for a premium price food/storytelling event, both among attendees as well as among corporate sponsors. We also concluded that any large scale event business that we pursue must be more fully outsourced and operated independently from editorial.

The main challenges were finding sufficient funding to adequately mount the event and the difficulty in incorporating and outsourcing responsibilities to outside contractors who had expertise that we lacked, but also lacked our expertise in areas of food and content. Finding that balance was a constant struggle.

We also had a unique challenge in incorporating creative performance with our reporters. Because we could not point to past examples that demonstrated our expectations, the writers were understandably concerned about fully engaging with the creative team. The creative team also spoke a slightly different language than our editorial team, reporters and journalists did -- it was a communications challenge to define terms and set expectations. We could certainly have been better in defining roles and maintaining clear lines of authority. However as a relatively "flat" organization going in, that was always going to be a challenge for us. FERN Talks and Eats did provide us with a good opportunity to stretch ourselves organizationally, an exercise that will prove useful as we expand. That being said, launching a new product or brand is always difficult and always requires greater resources than anticipated. This was no different for FERN Talks & Eats.

For other organizations considering this kind of event, it's important to maintain clear expectations from all participants. While simply adding food to an event does not require special expertise beyond selecting a quality caterer, we consider FERN Talks & Eats as representing more than an attempt to hold a large food event. The event concept in fact represents an attempt to create an

entertainment-oriented event that builds on our brand and content but has a “festival” feel. Other organizations may want to use food to achieve that feel or they may have other elements that mesh well with their content. We do feel that adding music, performance and other elements to our storytelling was very successful and can be replicated by others.

Other news organizations attempting this sort of event should recognize that they will be operating outside their comfort zone and will need to bring in “specialists” in whatever area required. For us, that meant bringing in a theater producer and director to conceive a creative vision for the event. We would not advise a news organization to “put on a show” entirely on their own. While food was central to our event and we brought expertise and relationships in the food world that enhanced the event, other elements were quite unfamiliar to us. Other organizations may find that food is the unfamiliar element. But our approach to this concept can be generalized. The key is finding the right team and giving a single person, whether inside or outside the organization final and full authority to make all necessary decisions regarding the event.

As our metrics demonstrate, we were successful along many dimensions. While we did not show a profit, that was partly a strategic decision to invest in the branding and “buzz” that will make future events easier to market and promote. Indeed, we have already received feedback from sponsors, including several who were unable to participate this time, of their interest in future “editions” of FERN Talks & Eats. It was without question the highest profile event we had ever mounted and introduced us to a large new audience.

In the end, however, the key to success was compelling content. If the stories and food did not meet expectations, the event could not have succeeded, even given a sell-out. But we know that attendees felt that FERN Talks & Eats was a quality experience that they would recommend to others. We firmly believe that we have successfully launched the FERN Talks & Eats brand and that there exists a path to profitability.