

So you want a master plan?

(Reprinted from *Camp Business Magazine*, March/April 2006)

In working with camps across the country, I hear one dream as much as any other... “We need to do a master plan.” In most cases, they have what was labeled as a strategic plan or master plan collecting dust in a thick three-ring binder high up on a shelf. Sometimes two, created a decade apart, but never implemented, never referred back-to, even though tens of thousands of dollars were spent on them. Why?

Garbage in – garbage out.

The first mistake people make is to think they can buy a plan. They hire a planning firm or architect, maybe they start with a strategic planning consultant. They show up for all the meetings the consultants plan, they fill out all the surveys. But they’re so busy running the camp, they assume the heavy thinking will be done by the consultant, after all they are the “experts.” The consultant, meanwhile, thinks their “process” is capturing the “best practices” and vision of the organization. They seldom sell themselves as experts in camping knowledge, but because they create the reams of text and pretty pictures, and present the “plan” with such authority, few question the outcomes.

What you *should* do: Hire your consultants by their references and looking at their past output, not what they say. You want three main things:

- Efficiency -- Can they keep the price reasonable by not doing more than you need and controlling high-end expenses like travel and specialists..
- Inquisitiveness and insight – Are they really fascinated in how your camp and other camps accomplish your goals? Can they ask probing questions *and* find the ah-ha!s from linking different ideas together into new solutions?

- Graphic communication – can they create perspective sketches and site maps that enable staff and potential donors to see what an end product would look like?

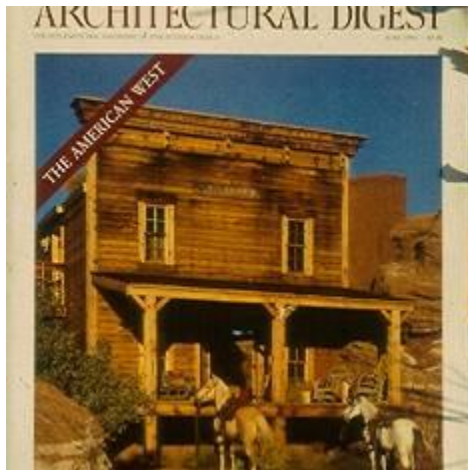


But what about brains? That, my friend, is up to you. If you’re smart, you won’t rely on your own personal brain. You’ll use this opportunity to attract the smartest people from the “network” you’ve created over the years. And from *your* network’s network. Invite in the 3 or 6 most experienced, most creative, most successful camp/resort/education people you can find within three degrees of separation. Most folks will be flattered you invited them, and will really enjoy being around other top performers. At most you’ll have to pay for an airline ticket, a hotel, and dinner. And work them near to death. Some of their best ideas will come out after a couple of beers late at night.

Those that you don't invite in person, ask to review your preliminary ideas and plans before and during the process. Some of the best ideas come from reacting to *bad* ideas! We just need to be open-minded enough to dig for the underlying concepts.

Bang 'em together

Another cause for bad plans is lack of preparation by the camp director and staff before the designers even get involved. Ron Kinneman, one of my mentors, told me that great ideas come from "banging two very different old ideas together. And the way to get more ideas banging, is to collect a lot of ideas." Ideas from lots of different places.



Visiting other camps is a good source, but you get to very few in a year (and it's even more important to ask the right questions when you get there.) Camp conferences are terrific for developing networks. But reading may be the most economical and efficient way to collect ideas. The newspaper, magazines, (those you read at Barnes and Nobel, and those you keep stacked on the back of your toilet), are quick, cheap, and diverse. To make the best use out of them, cut out the photos and articles that you think you might use in the future. When it comes time to hire an architect, you've got files filled with the ideas, materials, and aesthetics that will make the designers solutions come faster and better.

A city or a cabin?

Another reason master plans so seldom get used is they too often get too big. You start out wanting to put up a new cabin "in that nice flat spot over there," and your CEO wisely says, "Let's get a masterplan first so we don't put up stuff willy-nilly." ("Willy-nilly" being a planning term she learned at Rotary Club). That's excellent advice, but the plan can cause as much as the new cabin. So now you've used up the money for the cabin (which would have generated a healthy profit it's first year by adding capacity in your busiest season), and you now have a "Grand Total Price-tag" of \$15 million dollars.

The study cost so much because it went into enough depth to actually start building the \$15 million dollar plan.

If you're going to build a new camp from scratch, which happens occasionally, that's exactly what you need. But if your goal is to keep from putting a cabin in the place where a dining hall addition might better go someday, then you can get by on a less complicated process. And that's what most of us need – to gather smart people together with good communicators to periodically evaluate what we've been doing, and realistically dreaming about how we might do it better in the next year or two while keeping our options open for the future.

Making it MY plan

Which leads me to the final reason I think so many expensive old plans sit on the shelves. It's because they weren't "ours" and we don't like them. I don't know who said it, but it sums up my feelings on the whole master-strategic-plan issue. "Plans are worthless, but planning is priceless." It's the process of critically looking at our organizations and applying potential new ideas that helps us make good decisions. You don't do that just once every 10 years. You need to make it affordable enough to do it every time you have a change in top leadership, and every time we think our

product or market is changing, and every time we're about to spend a sum of money or use a piece of land. Maybe every three years instead of every 10 or 20. By doing that, the collection of ideas, the self-evaluation, and the thoughtful decision-making becomes a part of your camp culture. Each staff member makes hundreds of key decisions a year, that should all be impacted by the vision of where camp is going and how you hope to get there.

More money-savers

Here's a few other things to consider when you hire your planning team:

Do your own legwork. The price tag can double the more trips planners make to your meetings, and the reports they create. You can save a lot by having your own staff write sections like the history of your camp, current program offerings, future program requirements, and current facility evaluations before you meet. Have your file of camp facility ideas and the photos you've taken and borrowed of other camps.

The one piece of data they must have in order to start is "digital topography." It starts with a flyover of your property in the winter (no leaves on the trees) to take a special stereo photograph. It's important to get several bids for this part of the job because the price can double between vendors. The more advanced notice you can give them, the better price they can give you (by combining your flight with others.) Occasionally you can even find a company that already the necessary photos of your property in their files.

Then those photos go to a surveyor to be digitally converted to a topographic map. They come out to your site and do several "field" measurements to benchmark the photo data. Again, get several bids ad the price can be double between firms. When you're done you'll get a nice aerial photo of your camp to hang in the dining hall, and digital files that any architect can use for planning purposes for years to come.

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