



<http://www.scaryguys.com/plan.htm>

## **Plan Before You Build!**

Few haunters have the ideal haunt location. Most of us have to build our entire haunt in just a few days. Either for a one-night trick-or-treat or party, or a month-long commercial haunt, there is never enough time to get the haunt built and open for business. Everything comes down to a last minute panic and usually many good ideas get lost or undone. Avoid the panic, start planning now!

Good planning is the key to a successful opening night. By working out on paper how your haunt goes together from start to finish, you can save countless hours of frustration. Everyone can benefit from a bit of planning. As the saying goes, "Time spent planning, is time saved doing". Here are some tips to help you get your haunt open on time, and keep your sanity.

### **Start planning early.**

Most pro haunters are already thinking of their shows for the year beyond. So, start now! Remember, its never too late to start early! The quality of the show, no matter the size, is directly proportional to the amount of planning. Starting early gives you the ability to work at a reasonable pace, and avoid last minute frustrations. If you start now, just a couple of hours a month is enough for a great party or trick-or-treat haunt. Pace yourself, and you won't get caught short in September!

### **Develop a plan and a schedule.**

From building a haunt to a skyscraper, you need a plan and a schedule. A plan documents your thoughts and ambitions and defines the goal for a successful show. A schedule keeps you on track, lets you know what really needs to get done \*now\*, and what can wait another day or week.

**"When you have no destination in mind, any road will do".**

- Cheshire Cat said in Alice in Wonderland,

So, the first priority is to have a show to produce. Create a floorplan or layout of your potential haunt. It doesn't have to be fancy, but something that defines what you want to do for the season. You can fill in the details as you go along. This gives you an idea what sets, rooms, or props you need to build or buy, how many actors you will need, and just how big a show you are

producing. And it also gives you an idea how much you will need to spend to make the show a reality.

Now that you have a plan and an idea for a budget, you need to create the path to get there - a schedule.

A schedule gives you an idea what needs to be done, and when it needs doing. Putting together a schedule is really very simple. It can be a simple list, or a complex spreadsheet on a computer. Use what works for you. After all, you are the one that will have to use it! The most important thing is that you have a schedule and you follow it.

### **Here's just one way to put together a schedule.**

Start with your most important tools, pencil (with an eraser) and paper. List the things you want to do for your show. Simple, short phrases are more than enough for now ('sell drinks', 'post flyers', 'new coffin room', 'sell tshirts?', and so on..). List as many things as you can imagine. Do not worry about order or priority. What you want to capture is as complete a list as possible to help you get an idea of what is needed. Once you have the list, go back through it again and add details to the items. The details are the things that lead up to getting the main item completed. Now take the list and decide what is needed to be done first. For example, for that new coffin room you're planning, you will need to have purchased the materials, built the props and tested them before building the room. Any method that works for you is the right one. I like to use numbers and letters to define priorities: 1A would be buy wood and nails for the coffins, 1B is build the coffins, 1C is put the bodies in the coffins, and so on. Another task would use 2A, 2B, a third task uses 3A, 3B until all the main items and their tasks have been assigned an identifier. Now you have a list of the items needed to produce your show, assigned associations with each of the items, and their tasks needed to complete them. Look for main items (the number 1's, number 2's) that depend on each other, and arrange the list so that the items follow each other on the list. Now assign completion or due dates to each item. Remember that the dependent items can only be completed after the previous item is done. Now that you have dates assigned, arrange the list in date order.

Now you have a schedule! Your schedule will change as you get closer to opening night. That is perfectly normal. Make adjustments in the schedule to allow for those things that change along the way. Although my description is wordy, putting a schedule together is not difficult, or time consuming. You can use any method that works for you. The important thing is to have a schedule and stick to it!

### **Survey your potential site.**

You want to gather as much information as early as possible to ensure when you go to install your haunt, everything works as expected. Bring a measuring tape, paper, pencil, and a friend! Take the time to measure the site dimensions and draw the location on paper of anything that may interfere, or work with, your proposed haunt design. Put simply, measure everything. Note the locations of entrances, exits, windows, doors, outlets, air vents, trees, stumps, bushes, exterior lights, access to power, low spots that might collect water, high spots that might be a trip hazard, holes in the roof (or evidence of holes!), posts, doors, bathrooms, exit signs, sprinkler systems, controls, breaker boxes, in short - everything!

Once you are back home, draw the plan to scale on paper using measurements from the space you want to haunt. This doesn't have to be an exact drawing, but you want enough accuracy so you can make good decisions on placement of your haunt and its contents. Label all the items you measured on the drawing. Use this drawing as the foundation plan for your haunt. You may or may not have the opportunity to remodel the space you use, so you may need to redesign your haunt to fit the needs of the space. The scale drawing is the means to help you fit everything in place.

Plan to visit the site at least twice; once during the day to look at the site layout and do your measuring, and once after dark to see what lighting or objects will affect your haunt. For example, an open field may be perfect during the day, but if several neighbors all have bright streetlights surrounding the perimeter, the location may not be a good choice. Or, you have found an empty department store with a great space, but you will have to cover several hundred feet of glass to block the parking lot lights. These details only become problems if you did not plan for them!

Video taping the site is a great help. If you have (or can borrow) a video tape recorder, take the time to video the entire site from every angle. Video is an invaluable guide when you need a quick reminder where something is located at your site when you are not near it. When taping, record everything twice as long as you think you need to. You will be surprised how fast everything goes by when you are trying to watch for details. An added bonus is that taping the location before you setup your haunt gives you the ability to do a 'before and after' video of your haunt. Plan the time to video your haunt before you setup, after it is setup ready for operation, and if possible, during operation. This gives you a valuable reference in the off season to look at details you may have overlooked, and hints what could be better or different for next season. Also try to tape the location after you are packed up. This reference may come in handy if the owner has any questions how you left the site. Also, a good alternative to video is using a camera with a flash. Using either method will give you a visual reference of the site you can use to help you answer questions.

If you have the opportunity to see the location when its raining, by all means, get an umbrella and check it out. This lets you know if you have to worry about standing water, mud, leaking roofs, and trees that will drip for hours after the storm passes! For an indoor or outdoor event, the weather is a major determining factor in your attendance. Pay close attention to how it effects your plan. Even knowing the phase of the moon is important. A full moon not only brings out the best actors, but also works like a searchlight shining right down on your haunt.

### **Does the site work?**

If you cannot accomodate the site (or the site cannot accomodate you), find another site. Learning this early on saves a lot of time and frustration. For any potential haunt location, you need to honestly answer these questions:

### **Does the site have all the characteristics you are looking for?**

Your haunt is setup perfectly in the space, all detailed and ready to go and looks great - except you have to bring people in the back door and up stairs to get to the entrance. That guy in the wheelchair will less than amused when he calls the local TV station in frustration.

Be sure you have convenient and easy access to bathrooms, ticket areas, entrances and exits for all your guests, regardless of their physical condition. Also, be sure you have access to the services you need to run the haunt such as electrical power, compressed air, ventilation and heating, and so on.

### **Will your haunt fit well in the space?**

Make sure your design actually fits within the restrictions of the site. Making changes on paper is easy, making changes when you are on a short timetable with dozens of people (all wanting your immediate attention) is painful. Do not forget to allow enough walking room for actors and guests, enough emergency exits, and adequate access for handicapped needs. Remember, it will be dark in the haunt, so allow for some kind of minimal lighting for your actors!

### **Will you have room for guests waiting in line? Or exiting?**

Nobody likes to wait in line. At least be sure there is enough space to comfortably fit all the guests that are waiting, and they can easily move forward to get into the haunt. You may need to build stanchions and barricades, so plan for this potential early!

### **Is there enough parking space?**

You have a killer haunt. Your advertising plan worked to perfection, and attendance is amazing. The police and tow truck drivers are lined up to clear the road, taking your guests goodwill with them. Its a bad scene, try to avoid it if all possible. Take the time to estimate the throughput of your event, the average waiting time for guests, and the number of people waiting. This will give you the idea of the number of people driving up in cars and wanting to park. You may need to negotiate with a neighbor for extra parking. Some haunters even bus in guests from a remote parking lot to the haunt. You need to determine early on if your potential site can accomodate parking, too!

### **Is there room for a ticket booth?**

If you charge admission to your haunt, plan for space to support a ticket booth. Its easy to overlook its location. Plan for a location early on and work it into your foot traffic. Ideally, the ticket booth should not be a part of the waiting line, to avoid potential bottlenecks. Keeping the line for the ticket booth separate from the haunt waiting line lets both lines move at their own pace. Most haunters place the ticket booth close to where guests park their cars, then allow for the haunt waiting line to form in front of the haunt.

### **Is there room for other planned activities?**

The same is true for merchandise and concession sales. Some haunters find that concessions sell best when sold close to the waiting line, and merchandise sells best at the exit. You will need to give careful consideration to your selling location and your guests if you sell products. And don't forget to have a retail sales license if you sell drinks or merchandise - plan for it!

### **And the most important question: Will the fire inspector like the location?**

This is always the tough item. Planning will help your success. Early on, start talking with your fire inspector, share your (well thought out) plan. The inspector is concerned with the public safety, so be sure the plan you share has every safety detail noted. Include the locations of fire extinguishers, any emergency lighting systems, exit signs and corridors. There are many books,

articles, and videos covering haunts and haunt safety. (On the internet, visit [www.btprod.com](http://www.btprod.com)) Do your homework before talking with the inspector, and you will have a much easier time. Plan to work together to have a good design. Remember, the fire inspector can stop your show before it opens, take the time to plan a safe show!

Now that you have the perfect site picked out, surveyed and planned, get ready for moving day! Waiting for the day you need to start moving stuff to load the pickup is too late. Take a tip from professional movers, have a plan to move everything. They come into a moving job with all the boxes, padding, tape, markers, hand trucks and helpers to get the job done quickly.

### **Prefabricate everything**

When building up major props or scenes, prefabricate as much as possible. This is a major time saver. Think what goes into each scene so all you have to do is place and mount the items, instead of having to build them on site, at the last minute, when you really don't have the time! Start as early as possible building your props and scenes. You can build a single scene at a time in your garage. Store the completed scene in a corner of the garage, or even in the backyard (under cover, of course). Then, when its time to build the haunt, you have everything ready to put up.

### **Plan your packing and unpacking**

As the year progresses, keep all the sturdy boxes and plastic bags you can get your hands on. They are invaluable for storage off season. Get a few big markers and labels. As you store your newly completed scenes, pack all the props and creatures in boxes with labels that show what's inside and what scene it goes into.

Think of ways to pack your stuff so it can be unpacked as you need it. Label everything as much as possible on the OUTSIDE of the cartons so 'that perfect prop' can be located quickly. Its easy to spend a lot of frustrating time looking for stuff. This also lets volunteers help without hindering. And, after the haunt is finished, be sure to take the time to properly wrap, pack, and label your props so they are easy to find next year.

Develop a setup plan that's easy to understand so if you get help, your helpers \*can\* help. Plan to set up the big stuff first. The small detail stuff can be placed minutes before opening (and, sigh, sometimes after opening). It doesn't take long to shoot spider webs with a web shooter. Save this for last. This adds great ambience and can help minimize the lack of prop detail if you get caught with an unfinished haunt opening night.

Its very easy to get caught up with detailing each room as you go along, making each scene perfect. Keep consistency in mind. Get the big stuff in first - for the whole haunt, then work on the small stuff. Think about the entire haunt and how complete it is, not just each individual room or scene. This way, you will have a show that can open - and even improve as the season goes along!

### **And last but not least - before opening night - get some rest.**

Building a haunt is just like building a house in just a few days. This time is always a scramble, be fair to yourself even if everything isn't perfect (it never is) so be sure to get a good night's

sleep the night before the haunt opens for business. Pick a time to quit the night before opening and stick to it. Go home and rest. This way you will have the energy to get through the next day and night ahead.

And, just before you start the rush - stop - look in the mirror, take a deep breath, and smile. Everyone expects you to have all the answers. Everyone expects you to act calmly, even when the well meaning volunteers undo what you just did.... And you will, somehow, some way do it all!

Remember this is entertainment, its supposed to be fun! You did it! You're ready for another great season of scares and frights. Relax, never take the show or yourself too seriously. You built an entertaining and safe event for your guests. When you see a guest come in, smile (you know what they're in for, they don't!). When a staff member comes up in a panic, no matter what it is, take a deep breath and think before you react. Always respond calmly. If someone is depending on you to have the answers, you need to (at least appear) to have them. Keep in mind the squeals and screams that make it all worthwhile, and enjoy yourself!

If you have any thoughts, suggestions or comments about haunt planning, please let us know. We need all the help we can get too!

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