

TOP TEN TIPS:

How to Build an Award-Winning Festival

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PHOTO: LIZ TRAN

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Welcome to the journey of becoming your best festival!

This list of Top Ten Tips is based on a decade of successful tourism events in Selkirk, Manitoba, including products like *Homes for the Holidays: House & Heritage Tour* and *Holiday Alley: A Festival of Light, Art, Sound, Culture and Creativity*.

This document includes an easy-to-use worksheet which can be found on page 13.



Background

If you're here, it's because you think you have a great idea for a festival, or you want to improve your existing event. You're in the right place—and you're not alone.

In 2014, Red River North Tourism (seated in Selkirk, St. Andrews and St. Clements, Manitoba) hosted a community conversation. It asked local businesses and volunteers, “If you could create a new tourism initiative in our community in the off season, what would that be?” In a roomful of 50 people with dozens of ideas, three women had the exact same idea. (What's the chance of that?!)

They were total strangers to each other but left that meeting with a promise to get together, and over coffee the next week they created Homes for the Holidays: House & Heritage Tour. For five consecutive years, dozens of volunteers joined them and decorated over 40 local homes and heritage buildings for the festive season, welcoming thousands of ticket-buying visitors from far and wide.

That hugely successful program led the way for Holiday Alley in 2017, when the same volunteers decided to bring their decorating talent from private homes to the public streets. They knew the City of Selkirk had a plan to revitalize its struggling downtown and they wanted to be part of that. They created a weekend street festival of art, culture and creativity—held mostly outdoors in late November—that has won multiple awards and attracted thousands of tourists to their downtown, leading to its exciting renewal.

From a decade of event planning, the Holiday Alley and Red River North Tourism team has learned a few tricks. And when Holiday Alley started winning awards they were invited to tell their story. These 10 ideas are the foundation of their success. These tips and real life examples may help you launch your own festival or may just confirm what you already knew. Here's hoping there is at least one new idea here for you and your community.

Top Ten Tips

1. WHAT'S THE GOAL?

If the plan doesn't work, change the plan—but never the goal.

Establish your main goals early and stick to them. Even if you have to pivot and change your plans, stick to the goals.

Make the goals broad enough that they do not confine growth. And be brave enough to make them inspirational.

Holiday Alley's goals are:

1. Be a tourism magnet
2. Support Selkirk's downtown revival
3. Connect the community
4. Support other non-profits
5. Advance art, culture and creativity

Holiday Alley had three successful years and was getting bigger and better when a worldwide pandemic hit. Two weeks before the 4th annual event in November 2020, the Province of Manitoba closed all public events.

The Holiday Alley team paused and went back to its goals and the volunteers asked themselves: could they still deliver on their goals in the middle of a pandemic? Did Holiday Alley have to stop or shrink? Or could the opposite happen? Could it actually... stretch?

Did the festival have to be just in downtown Selkirk, Manitoba? Could it engage even more people from other places that were also shut down?

Within 48 hours of the Manitoba Government closing all public events, the organizers retooled the entire festival program. Instead of a two-day live event, Holiday Alley 2020 became "12ish Days" of virtual, safe, drive-by, pick-up and watch-from-home events.

Instead of an event that showcased talent only in Selkirk, Manitoba, Holiday Alley reached out to performers around the world who lived in towns called Selkirk. It asked people in Selkirk, Ontario, in Selkirk, New York and even in a Selkirk in Scotland to join in a virtual sing-along. Holiday Alley provided them with fun new lyrics to the Twelve Days of Christmas (now the 12 Days of Holiday Alley) and edited together a new Christmas sing-along video.

The 12ish Days of Holiday Alley launched with a two-hour virtual concert with dozens of musicians performing from their kitchens, garages, living rooms and street corners around the world. And it encouraged families to order from their favourite local restaurant for "dinner and a movie" and tune into "Holiday Alley TV" from the comfort and safety of home.



When a pandemic interrupted Holiday Alley's live festival, the group pivoted and created the "12ish Days of Holiday Alley" starting with a two-hour "broadcast" hosted from the pandemic-deserted downtown Selkirk, Manitoba.

2. LISTEN UP

Lead community consultations early and often.

Once your core festival team has set simple goals, be brave and take them to the community and ask, “If we created an event like this, what would make it great?”

While you may think you have a great plan, you may learn something about why it might not fly once you float the idea to a broader audience. There may be opposition, concern, criticism or bylaws that could throw a wrench in the plans. It's always great to know where those hurdles are on the course before you start the race.

But more importantly you may find that a community conversation brings out allies and people who have event planning experience. They could be the project's new best friend with even better ideas and fresh energy.

Before Holiday Alley was off the ground, the lead organizers invited everyone—from city councillors and restaurant owners to shop keepers and artists—to join a four-hour community think tank. Led by a facilitator, the attendees generated dozens of ideas. In small groups they discussed them in detail, then everyone voted on their favourite ideas. These ideas were used to help shape the first Holiday Alley.

The listening continues as the project grows because citizens get braver, people are prepared to pitch new ideas and newcomers want to get involved. Holiday Alley hosts community consultations every couple of years to make sure the festival stays fresh and reflects an ever-changing community.



In the first year, the community said it wanted “lots and lots” of lights in downtown Selkirk. With help from City of Selkirk staff, Holiday Alley took that community direction and draped 40 buildings in the downtown with 5,000 strings of LED lights that are turned on in November at the launch of the festival and stay on for 90 of the darkest days of winter.

3. KNOW YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Who's who in your community and what are they doing?

Before you go much further, it's important to know who is in your community; who works and lives in the vicinity of the event? Who are the movers and shakers? Who owns businesses that will benefit from tourism, what do they care about, can they be supportive?

Check with your local chamber of commerce or the economic development office to see if they already have a register of businesses and building owners in the vicinity of the event. If they don't, you might have to do what Holiday Alley volunteers did: knock on doors in the neighbourhood of the festival zone.

Create a spreadsheet by address of who owns or rents each building, what kind of business operates in it and the contact person's name, email address, phone number and social media handles.

This is a list that you'll return to repeatedly to engage the community. And it will have to be refreshed as businesses come and go.

As Holiday Alley leaders got to “know the environment” they were surprised to learn that the old downtown was coming back to life in large part thanks to small independent businesses run by women entrepreneurs. Those women became the festival's biggest champions. It will be important to identify and recognize the potential local champions in your own community.

When a new business joins the area it's a great opportunity to get them involved in your festival either as a sponsor by donating goods and services or by opening their space to host an activity like a soup-tasting station, a photo booth or a musician on a stool. When one of the goals is to revitalize a downtown area, you want to purposefully create a draw that will pull people into places they might not normally visit. And that's good for local businesses.



A Holiday Alley media pitch accompanied by a photo of the women entrepreneurs in downtown Selkirk, Manitoba took a whole page in the Winnipeg Free Press.

4. SHARE THE LOAD

Every idea is a good idea if it has an owner and it supports the goals.

In a community-driven festival everyone can have a role, from volunteers helping with kids' crafts, to a local gallery hosting a painting competition, to the local high school carpentry students building structures for artists to paint, to several choirs hosting an evening of song.

Events that fully engage volunteers and make space for other organizations to own a piece of the event have a longer shelf life. As new people bring new perspectives and energy it keeps the event fresh and allows it to grow without ever getting stale. Nothing burns a festival out too soon than relying on just a handful of the same volunteers.

At Holiday Alley, every idea is a good idea if it has an owner and supports the original goals to advance art, culture and creativity.

For example, architects and artists from Winnipeg said they wanted to create a new International Straw Sculpture Symposium in 2023 and asked if it could be launched at Holiday Alley. "Of course," said the organizers.

Winnipeg's Sputnik Architecture and Anvil Tree organized the event, brought in a world-renowned straw sculptor, connected with school groups to offer field trips to learn straw sculpting and over a month produced a 2-storey tall straw lantern that was showcased in downtown Selkirk on Holiday Alley. For its part, Holiday Alley found space for the straw sculpture construction, added the event to Holiday Alley's marketing tools and lined up widespread media coverage.



After Holiday Alley the sculpture was put in storage and then brought out and burned on the river front to mark the spring equinox.

5. CHA=CHING = LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

Always ask, "How does it make money so we can keep this going year after year?"

Every event needs a budget that looks like a balanced financial investment portfolio. You don't want to put all your eggs in one basket, in case one of those financial sources dries up.

To make sure your event is financially secure year-over-year, you need a mix of income sources. That could include grants from government organizations and non-profits, sponsorships from local businesses, services in-kind for things like printing, ticketed events like concerts and product sales like branded merchandise.

Your budget should include a 10 to 20 per cent reserve to help launch the following year's event. Ideally some of that goes untouched and compounds year-over-year so you have a long-term reserve. Holiday Alley's goal was to have at least one year's expenses in the bank, so if it hit a bump in the road—like a pandemic!—there would be a rainy-day fund to draw on.

There can be up to 40 different activities on the Holiday Alley schedule every year, and 80 per cent of them are free. And that's only possible because every new idea is tested against the questions "How does it pay for itself? Does it make money? Can it break even?"

It's easy to get excited about an idea and start planning it only to have to abandon it when reality sets in that there are costs associated with buying art materials, paying performers, hiring security, renting porta potties or feeding volunteers.



Even kids' crafts on Holiday Alley can have costs that needed to be considered when the idea to host "Kids' Crafternoon" was first conceived.

6. DATA IS KNOWLEDGE

Survey, count, measure, compare – from the start.

In the first year of an event, it might seem pointless to collect data because the attendance numbers might be low. But if you dream of growing your event, it's good to have something to benchmark against so you can be proud of your growth and year-over-year successes. And even if your event is well underway, the best time to collect data is now.

Data helps you plan programming. It tells you if an activity inside your event is worth doing again. Is the interest in that activity growing or declining? And why? Does it matter? Should you do it anyway because it's the right thing to do?

Additionally, funders, such as corporate sponsors, are interested in data such as attendance numbers, as well as the visibility of their logos in event programs. Meanwhile, government grants often require evidence of recipients meeting funding program objectives. If your funding model includes municipal, provincial or federal support through

cultural or heritage funding programs, reporting requirements may also include parameters based on the cultural diversity of performers, vendors and artisans at the event.

In the case of Holiday Alley, which has supporting downtown revitalization as a key objective, organizers request statistics from shopkeepers, cafés and restaurants regarding their weekend traffic and sales during Holiday Alley compared to typical weekends throughout the year. They also inquire about any observed influx of new customers during the event.

A little gift shop in downtown Selkirk once saw a 500% increase in sales on a Holiday Alley weekend. It was the best weekend it had since opening three years earlier.

The shop owners saw so much value in the event, they became a lead sponsor the next year. That sponsorship happened because Holiday Alley was collecting data and could prove the value of the festival.



ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW!

Every year the Holiday Alley team imagines – "What if we could do something new this year to celebrate art, light, sound, culture and creativity in Selkirk's historic downtown?" And we did!



- PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DAY FOR TEACHERS**
 About 200 teachers spent their professional development day at Holiday Alley learning about Indigenous teachings they can take back to the classroom.
"Education got us in this mess and education will get us out."
 Hon. Murray Sinclair, former Selkirk resident / 1997-2024.
- MOCKTAIL WORKSHOPS**
 With a new business in downtown Selkirk – Nabiz Market – it was a perfect time to introduce a new culinary treat: cocktail-making workshops and a cocktail bar on the street.
- FIRE ON THE RED X 2**
 Teachers and students from the SPARK program in Selkirk designed and built their own straw sculpture. Mentored by Anvil Tree, the students designed a giant eye, which meant we had two giant art installations for Fire on the Red in 2025.
- SOUND BATH**
 There comes a time in every good party when you need to just relax and Blow Fitness provided that with a Sound Bath for the first time on Holiday Alley, where you could step out of the busyness and seriously chill.
- NEWCOMERS' STORYTELLING CAFÉ**
 Newcomers to the community spent weeks preparing to share their empowering stories of pivotal moments in their lives of struggle and fulfillment and the journey that led them to Manitoba.
- RIBBON SKIRT FASHION SHOW**
 Community members braved the November chill to bring a Ribbon Skirt Fashion Show to the street for the first time, sharing their culture and traditions.

See if you can find yourself in the super fun Holiday Alley wrap-up video at holidayalley.ca

holidayalley.ca info@holidayalley.ca

LIGHT

- 150,000 LED LIGHT BULBS
- 38 BUILDINGS
- 5 CITY BLOCKS
- 2 GIANT BURNING STRAW SCULPTURES

ART

	2025	9-YEAR TOTAL
Artists, crafters, artisans with work for sale	60	787
Large art installations	7	30
Art demos, workshops, lessons	13	57

SOUND

	2025	9-YEAR TOTAL
Groups of singers, fiddlers, dancers, performers, poets	165	702
Performances delivered	45	453
Indoor & outdoor venues & stages	4	107

CULTURE

Holiday Alley is always looking for ways to tell the world about the good work that is happening in this community. This year a collaboration with local educators, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Cultural Carriers allowed us to deliver a professional development day for nearly 200 teachers who learned about Indigenous cultural teachings. The professional development day became a news story that ran across the country on English CBC radio and television and IC (French CBC) radio and television.

CREATIVITY (Where the wacky ideas live!)

	2025	9-YEAR TOTAL
Poosh Parade contestants	10	187
Family photos with Santa	250	2,398
Soup Cook-Off competitors	10	101
Sheep Poetry entries (excluding 8 sheep)	80	505

10TH ANNIVERSARY IN 2026!

What can you bring? Tell us.

holidayalley.ca info@holidayalley.ca

HITTING OUR GOALS

Holiday Alley has four main goals, and we carefully track how we do year over year.

1: BE A TOURISM MAGNET

84% of attendees live outside of Selkirk
 82% of Soup Cook-Off participants live outside of Selkirk
 61% of social media followers are from outside the region
 67 media hits in 2025 (4/24 over nine years)

2: SUPPORT DOWNTOWN BUSINESSES

Increase in sales, traffic & transactions during Holiday Alley:

500% at a gift store
 300% at a coffee shop
 240% at an eatery
 200% at a collectibles shop

"Saturday was our best Holiday Alley day ever for our store!"

"People often stop back the week after or even months later – saying they came during Holiday Alley."

"It is definitely the biggest sales event and weekend for us of the year!"

3: CONNECT COMMUNITY

7,800 unique visitors
 1.5 average visits per visitor
 10,995 total visits
 100 volunteers
 15 local corporate sponsors
 2 local non-profit partners
 10 government, agency, crown corporation partners

4: SUPPORT LOCAL NON-PROFITS

\$171,000 donated back to local non-profits.

The Homes for All Fund at the Selkirk & District Community Foundation was created by our volunteers and this year it helped fund renovations of transitional housing at Nova House.

We partnered with non-profits like the Gwen Fox Gallery, Selkirk Friendship Centre, Gordon Howard Centre, several choirs and the Interlake Art Board.



7. BUILD IT (TELL THEM) AND THEY WILL COME

Brand, market, story-tell, photograph/video – all the time!

In the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, the hero hears voices and has visions telling him to mow down his corn field and create a baseball diamond, and if he does the ghosts of famous baseball players past will come play in his field. The voices tell him, “If you build it, they will come.”

But in the real world you need to do more to get people to attend your event. You must “Build it – tell them you built it – and then they will come.”

Holiday Alley spends a lot of time and money telling people they need to come out to celebrate and engage with art, culture and creativity. It allocates approximately 25 to 30 per cent of its total budget on communications.

It uses earned media (mainstream media coverage), owned media (Holiday Alley’s own website and social media page), shared media (communication tools its partners have) and paid media (radio and print ads).

Holiday Alley excels in attracting earned media – which is trying to get coverage in mainstream media and get profiled on the media outlets’ websites and available social media channels. Every year, Holiday Alley will create a dozen press releases, then track coverage and the audience reach.

Holiday Alley knows communications = tourists, and that fulfills the festival’s goal to be a tourism magnet. It knows through exit surveys that 40 to 55 per cent of attendees live outside of Selkirk and that 50 to 60 per cent of people who follow Holiday Alley on social media are from outside the area.

Those are the results of continuous marketing and storytelling that builds anticipation and sustains public interest year over year.



Every year Holiday Alley creates a lineup of interviews so that TV stations in Winnipeg can broadcast live from the event, incorporating several guest interviews into the morning newscasts.

8. BE SILLY

Be fearless and embrace the unusual.

Now that you know getting media coverage is super helpful you need something unique to pitch to newsrooms, and in turn, to attract the curious.

It could be an activity that is the first of its kind in your region, in the country or in the world. Or maybe it's the biggest, longest, widest activity ever created. Or the "best", as decided by citizen judges. It could be an idea that comes from far away that makes sense for your community or happened decades ago that you're re-imagining.

Think, "what can we create that is the biggest, best, first, only?"

Creative, unique, quirky elements attract attention and will differentiate your festival.

Holiday Alley strives to tackle one new silly idea every year – in 2022 that was Sheep Poetry.

The co-founder of Holiday Alley remembered something she saw at a Creative Cities conference decades ago that came out of England. A British artist painted words on the sides of real-live sheep and let them mingle, creating poems organically. Holiday Alley borrowed that idea from a pasture in England in 2002 and re-tooled it for downtown Selkirk in 2022. And being surrounded by an agricultural community, the Selkirk festival knew where to get sheep!



PHOTO: SHIRLEY MUJR



PHOTO: SHIRLEY MUJR

Sheep Poetry got media attention coast-to-coast in Canada. In the first year, 80 citizen poets came by and created their own woolly poems. Meet the starring sheep and read the poems at HolidayAlley.ca under Activities.

9. PLAY TO WHAT MAKES YOU AUTHENTIC

Know what makes you different from anyone else.

Of all the tips here, this is likely the most important: know what makes your community different from anywhere else and celebrate that.

In addition to Tip #3: Know your environment, also know your history, who are the people who make up your community and what does the community have to share and teach others? Those are the things that make your community different from the one down the road or the one half-way across the country. And that's what tourists are looking for – an experience they can't get anywhere else. Above all, don't try to be something you're not.

For example, over 30 per cent of people in Selkirk identify as Indigenous, with three First Nations communities within driving distance to Selkirk (approximate population 10,700 in 2024). To ensure the festival reflects the community, Holiday Alley works with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers to deliver several days of Indigenous content.

The festival hosts two full days of field trips for school children to come to Holiday Alley where Indigenous educators teach students the meaning of the traditional hand drum and the practice of creating a tobacco tie. Children are sent home with letters that invite the parents to come to Holiday Alley on the weekend where Elders are available in teepees to share teachings their children just learned.

Holiday Alley's opening night includes a traditional Round Dance where complete strangers hold hands and dance, led by a Knowledge Keeper and drummer.

Being authentic also means listening and watching how your community is changing. In the last few years, Selkirk has become home to a growing population of new Canadians. So going forward, Holiday Alley will be working hard to welcome and celebrate newcomers and create a place for them to celebrate and share their art, culture and creativity.



Elders gather with visitors to share Indigenous knowledge embracing culture and authenticity.

10. STEP UP TO BE THE CHEERLEADER

A committee is not enough.

In the early years, every event needs a charismatic cheerleader.

Someone needs to be driving the bus. They don't have to be the driver forever, but certainly non-profit events need a volunteer champion for the first few early years.

A committee is important, stacked with volunteers who share the same goals. But too often nothing gets done between meetings if there isn't a captain.

A logo and good branding are some of the best first investments,

but someone needs to "own" the branding to make sure it lives up to its potential and everything created sticks to the brand.

Ideally, your passionate advocate has good communication skills, connections in the community, knows where the deep pockets are to look for financial partners, is prepared to be visible and knows how to keep an eye on the budget.

Every community has someone like this; they are usually the same busy people who are sitting on other boards but may be getting "bored" and looking for a new, exciting challenge.



PHOTO: LIZ TRAN

Another great quality in a cheerleader is someone who is a bit fearless and prepared to wear the goofy hat in front of thousands of people, as seen here in Holiday Alley's first year where 4,000 people showed up in a city of 10,000 people.

Conclusion

While Holiday Alley is a small winter city festival, these Top Ten Tips are transferable. There is certainly lots of great advice to be learned from other inspiring events; please seek those out. Start by connecting with your local tourism association or organization.

Good luck with your event and don't hesitate to contact the good folks at Holiday Alley if you need to talk an idea through. Find them at holidayalley.ca



PHOTO: LIZ TRAN



PHOTO: LIZ TRAN



PHOTO: LIZ TRAN

Worksheet

How can you use these tips to build or improve your festival? Add your notes in the space provided.

1. WHAT'S THE GOAL?

If the plan doesn't work, change the plan – but never the goal.

When a pandemic interrupted a live festival, Holiday Alley still supported musicians and created Holiday Alley TV.

2. LISTEN UP

Lead community consultations early and often.

The idea to add “lots and lots of light” to downtown Selkirk came up at the first community consultation. Now there are 5,000 strings of lights on 40 buildings.

3. KNOW YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Who's who in your community, and what are they doing?

Holiday Alley has the names, phone numbers, emails, and social media handles for dozens of businesses in the festival zone.

4. SHARE THE LOAD

Every idea is a good idea if it has an owner and supports the goals.

When someone wanted to organize a Silly Hat Making contest, Holiday Alley used its marketing tools to collect supplies and drive attendance.

5. CHA-CHING = SUSTAINABILITY

Always ask, “how does it make money?”

Holiday Alley builds a budget every year, which includes 10-20% of revenue to provide a cushion to launch the next year.

6. DATA RULES

Survey, count, measure, compare – from the start.

Holiday Alley offers prizes to visitors who scan a QR code for a survey, which asks how much they spent at Holiday Alley.

7. BUILD IT (TELL THEM) AND THEY WILL COME

Brand, market, storytell, and collect photos and video alllllll the time.

Every week for 10 weeks leading up to its event, Holiday Alley issues a press release that features one unique angle.

8. BE SILLY

Be fearless and embrace the unusual.

Holiday Alley put eight live sheep on the street wearing bibs with festival words on them, and citizens wrote 80 poems based on the words.

9. PLAY TO WHAT MAKES YOU AUTHENTIC

Know what makes you different from anyone else.

Selkirk, Manitoba is an ice fishing capital, so in the first year of Holiday Alley the art installations were ice fishing shacks built by students and painted by local artists.

10. STEP UP TO BE THE CHEERLEADER

A committee is not enough.

For its first few years, Holiday Alley had a high-energy, goofy volunteer who got donors and volunteers excited about what was possible.
