

A DJ is performing at a club night. The DJ is wearing a dark shirt and a headband, and is seen from the side, looking down at their equipment. The background is a dark, crowded club with many people dancing. The lighting is dim, with some bright spots from stage lights. The overall atmosphere is energetic and lively.

beatport. SOUNDS

How To: Start A Club Night (And Make Money)

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How do you enter the saturated club night market in a global recession and make a success of it? London-based promoter, Barry McManus talks us through the factors that make or break a new night.



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So you want to run your own club night? Great. Got an idea about the ideal venue and music policy? Even better. Maybe you've even spotted a glaring gap in the market. Awesome. Unfortunately they are just the first steps on a long, hard road. Those who think running a successful club night is about printing a few flyers, booking a guest DJ or two and partying hard when the night finally arrives don't last long in the business. Running a club night requires a delicate blend of business acumen, marketing know-how, organizational skills, a true passion for the music you're promoting, and a hell of a lot of hard work.

Browse the listings of DJ magazines, log on to [Resident Advisor](#) or check your event invites on Facebook and it seems as though every man and his dog is starting a club night. With a slew of new parties appearing every week, each claiming to be the hottest ticket in town, it has become increasingly difficult to establish a new club night as a regular fixture in people's diaries. Add this to the effects of a global recession and it can seem as though running a profitable night is all but impossible. However, if you follow our top tips, you might just surprise yourself.

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- **Music**

- Music policy is the cornerstone upon which any club night is built. Get the music programming right and you're well-on-your-way to attracting and keeping your crowd. Get it wrong, and at best people won't come back; at worst they won't turn up at all.
- Consistent and considered programming builds a musical identity in the minds of your punters. It helps ensure people turn up each-and-every time, regardless of whether they've heard of the headline act, merely because they know and trust the music policy of the night.
- Confused programming that genre-hops like a demented bunny makes it difficult to gain a regular crowd, as each week you risk alienating punters who expect one thing but get another. Having a packed night soundtracked by electro DJs is great, but follow it up with a night of dubstep and it's unlikely to excite the same people. Put them off once and they might never come back.
- It's the job of your resident DJs to set in motion the chosen musical direction, whether it's straight-up house, pumping techno, or wonky dubstep. Residents are the foundation of any night and all guest DJs should reflect their musical remit in order to give your night that special ebb and flow and your punters a coherent experience.
- Consistent needn't mean boring or predictable. **Adventures In The Beetroot Field**, the monthly soiree at legendary London hangout, Fabric, is a perfect example of how resident DJs are fundamental to attracting and maintaining a loyal following. The night has made a name for itself by showcasing a diverse range of live acts and DJs that span numerous genres. The key to its success is the fact that its eclectic approach to bookings is underpinned by the resident DJs who have built a musical identity for the night, which attracts an open-minded crowd who have grown to trust their musical vision.

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- **Where?**
 - As a host of now-bankrupt estate agents may once have said: it's all about location, location, location. Spend time scoping out the pros and cons of various options as the quality of your venue will have a massive impact on your punter's experience. Is the venue easy to get to? Does it already attract your kind of people? What is its reputation?
 - It's likely that the best venues have regular promoters for their Fridays and Saturdays – If so, consider taking a Thursday or Sunday for a foot-in-the-door or look for a lesser-known venue willing to give you a prime slot. Whichever route you choose, be sure to consider the more practical aspects such as opening hours, hire costs, and management's policy on bar/door split as this information is fundamental to setting your budget.
 - Get technical: check out the sound system at full tilt and test the DJ booth. No one wants to hear great music through a tin-pot, under-powered system and DJs can be very particular about their kit, so make sure it's a proper club set-up and not some second-hand mobile DJ cast-off.

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- **Who?**
 - If you're looking for a student crowd, then catch them early. Launch in Fresher's week when everyone is looking for a party and has money in their pocket- a rammed first night can build unstoppable momentum. Offer them something they can't refuse: free or discounted entry alongside drinks offers should do the trick. Plan dates around the university calendar in order to avoid an empty club during holidays or the exam season.
 - If it's a local crowd, then consider the competition. Are there other nights doing what you do? Look to avoid direct competition and instead, try to tap into the local scene on a different night. On the flip side, local competition can sometimes be beneficial. In the same way antiques shops are often found in the same part of a town, it's often the case that a collection of like-minded club nights in the same area can create a buzz around an area which in turn, attracts more punters.

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- **Don't Run Before You Can Walk**
 - If you're lucky to sell out your first few events, then take a deep breath. Don't get ahead of yourself by booking massive venues thinking you can make a killing on the door. One under-attended night in a large venue with serious overheads can instantly undo all your hard work both in terms of finances and reputation.
 - Aim to grow steadily and organically: it's much better to have a queue stretching around the corner than to have 50% capacity in a larger venue. Only when you're consistently faced with the situation of more people wanting to get in than space allows should you consider a larger venue. But when you do, proceed with caution: a cavernous venue can easily drain the magic created at a previous home.
 - Take the same approach with your DJ bookings. Start with local DJs who have a strong local following you can tap into. Once you're consistently turning a profit, look to cast your net wider and book national guests of proven quality – resident DJs from larger clubs is a good place to start. This helps not only to build the reputation of your night locally, but also gains your night exposure nationally. This enhanced reputation makes your night a more attractive proposition for international DJs and, in some cases, it can be a bargaining tool for discounted DJ fees.
 - Booking international DJs is a big step financially, so be confident you can fill your club or you'll quickly find yourself sliding into the red.

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- **Be Different**
 - Offer your punters something that's unique. Sell merchandise such as t-shirts or stickers. Cool branding on t-shirts is a great promotional tool and is another way to supplement the club night's coffers.
 - But it should never just be 'take, take, take.' Give something back: get your residents to give out free mix CDs or do the occasional free party for those on your Facebook group or mailing list.
 - Headline DJs come-and-go: it's the loyalty and affinity between your night and the crowd that is key to long-term success. Foster it.

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- **Facebook and Beyond**
 - There was a time when a Facebook or myspace page could fill nights. Not any more. Online promotion remains a powerful promotional tool, but you'll need to lots more to get people through the doors. Print flyers and take the time to distribute them in record shops, student unions, cool shops, and bars. Posters are a great idea, but be careful where you put them: council's take a dim view of fly-posting and you could land yourself with a fine or a police warning. Spend your weekends hanging around outside clubs and bars handing out flyers to the early hours. This is the unglamorous side of club promotion, but it's essential if you're to stand a chance of getting the right people to your night.
 - Get on the internet and submit your event to all the major listings websites, such as: **Resident Advisor, Time Out, Spoonfed, Data Transmission**. Get on the blogs and forums and make sure all the right people know about the party – start chatting and you'll be pleasantly surprised by the positive response.

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- **Get Friends Involved**
 - If they like you enough (or you give them enough free drinks,) friends can make the difference between a great idea and a great night. Enthusiastic friends who turn up when the night opens get the party off on the right foot and give a good impression to the first few paying punters that arrive. Rope your friends in to helping with handing out flyers and spreading the word with the incentive of free entry and a couple of drinks. It's a cheap and trustworthy way of promoting the night and attracting the right sort of people.
- **Be Professional**
 - You're planning a party – you're not *at* a party – therefore deal with people in a business-like manner. Send contracts and deposits to booking agents on time, answer their questions swiftly and in-full. Build an open and positive relationship with the venue manager – they can make your life extremely easy or ridiculously hard. Get everything in writing to ensure you don't get ripped off: verbal agreements mean nothing in this business. Try to stay sober for at least the first half the night. Problems invariably arise and they're much better dealt with on a clear head. Besides, no guest DJ wants to be greeted by a promoter who is off their face.

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- **Budget**
 - Be meticulous with how you spend your money: make a realistic budget and stick to it. The main considerations in a club night budget will be venue capacity, door price, DJ fees, promotional fees and a reserve fund for hidden or unexpected costs (taxis, dinner, extra drinks tokens for DJs, and so on.) Once that's decided, calculate optimistic and pessimistic outcomes for the night and see how the numbers stack up. If you barely break even using your optimistic model, then it's probably a good idea to go back to the drawing board and re-assess the night and its budget.
- **Enjoy...**
 - There is no such thing as the perfect club night. Things won't always go according to plan: you might get a poor turn out, an awkward DJ or a crappy mixing desk. But in those rare moments when everything looks to be running smoothly, grab a beer, have a dance and enjoy the rewards of your hard work. This is *your* passion, remember.

With a background in club promotion, Barry is also a self-confessed house music obsessive, vinyl purist, dance music journalist, and radio broadcaster. Barry is General Manager at [Sample Magic](#) and Director of London Electronic Music Event, the UK's leading annual electronic music conference.

