

Evaluating and Developing a Visual Program for High School Marching Bands

Jarrold Huntley
www.marchingnetwork.biz

This hand out is meant to be a beginning guide to help you evaluate an existing visual program, and to build and improve it to be yours. All programs will have different needs due to many factors such as band size, community support, budget, and geographic limitations. There is not a 'one size fits all' solution, so don't be afraid to experiment a bit while you find what works for your band and its specific needs.

Hiring your staff/design team:

First, look at your band size and limitations, and then assess what is possible. If you have a large band (120 members or more) and your budget allows for it, you may want to hire visual staff that can assist with marching basics, learning drill, and enforcing proper rehearsal protocol from the field, and even music sectionals. If your band is limited in size and resources, you may choose to use these people for help during band camp only.

I. Hiring a Visual Staff

When it comes to teaching marching basics and fundamentals, extra instructional help can be a BIG help. Even if the staff consists of just 1 person, that 1 person doubles your ability to reinforce marching concepts and proper rehearsal protocol all season. If you can afford to hire several visual instructors, even better.

Always do your normal vetting process. Do applicants have positive reference checks or recommendations from previous employers? If you're having a hard time finding quality people, start calling your favorite drum corps and ask if any of their members live in your area that you can contact. Local universities are another great resource for potential instructors.

II. Hiring a Drill Writer

Find someone you like! Spend time looking and talking to your candidates before you make a final choice. Merely hiring someone because they are the 'big name' or write for the school you really like in your area is not a guarantee you will get the best drill for your band. You need to be able to communicate all strengths and weakness of your band with your drill writer. You should be able to talk openly about instrument placement, visuals, and time limitations.

You want to be able to talk about these things not just in general but in specifics and in real time. Be very honest with your expectations with scheduling, billing, and payments before you make your decision. These things will most likely be the deal

breakers later in the season if things don't work out so be upfront at the start, it will save you time in the long run.

III. Hiring a Colorguard Staff:

Just like you would do with your visual and musical instructors, seek out references and recommendations from other groups in the area or contact a local winterguard circuit to post an ad to their "job classifieds" section.

Ask any drum corps in the area for recent age outs interested in teaching.

Make sure this is someone you communicate well with! You will end up working very closely with this person. Be very clear with how you envision their role in the program. If you have certain expectations of the guard program, be upfront early in the hiring and design process. They will most likely need to hire supplementary colorguard staff, to assist with instruction.

Check out older videos of your candidates past groups and watch the guard work like you would watch *So You Think You Can Dance* or *American Idol*.

-Is the work musical?

-Does it fit the musical phrasing?

-Most importantly is it clean & does it all move together?

Ask this person to come in and teach the guard for an hour or so. Give them some music you like before they come in and ask them to write 32 to 64 counts to it. They can then teach that phrase to the guard. This will give you a good idea of the persons teaching and writing skills.

Marching Basics:

Everyone will have their opinion about what technique is best, but the fact that there are so many different styles is proof that what technique you use is irrelevant. It's all about **consistency and uniformity**. When picking a marching style/technique, consider this: How does the technique you use affect how well your members can play on the move?

Remember:

We are working for uniformity!

We want everyone look the same as they move around the field!

This takes consistency!

I like to break marching basics into a list in order of priority:

1. *Timing*
2. *Upper-body posture*
3. *Leg shape*

1. Timing is everything! If we want to achieve the most basic goals of marching band (play and move together) then you have to be in time.

2. Upper-body posture must be good no matter what style you use for lower body technique. Can the members hold their instrument properly so they have fluid hand and finger dexterity? Is the body in an upright position making it easier to get the air stream through the instrument?

3. Leg shape is directly related to timing. Whatever leg shape you pick ask yourself one question: Does your leg shape create the best opportunity to have everyone's feet in time?

Cleaning from the box:

-Your biggest responsibility when running a rehearsal from the box is **time management**. Create a fluid rehearsal that is consistent and makes it possible to solidify the musical memory needed from your members.

-Find a system for running rehearsal that allows and encourages individual members to check their work and make corrections in the same manor every rep.

-Most visual errors are due to variations in pathways and inaccurate step sizes throughout the phrase.

-Work individual and section pathways when teaching/cleaning drill. Unless it's a follow the leader, everyone should be taking a straight pathway from point A to point B. I have found the best way to practice this is to 'face the dot' once or twice when you are running things set to set, then run it facing performance direction. This method works best during the drill learning process.