

How Spartan Race Overcomes Obstacles with Smartsheet



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Rob Neitzel, Vice President of Operational Excellence and Chief of Staff



Customer:

Spartan

Industry:

Live Entertainment, Travel and Hospitality

Organization Size:

Medium (50 - 999 employees)

Region:

North America

Website:

spartan.com

With more than 250 events across more than 40 countries on six continents, Spartan is the world's largest obstacle course race (OCR) and endurance brand. Spartan attracts more than one million annual participants across all fitness levels, from beginners to elite.

Background

Participating in a Spartan Race can be a life-changing experience. The company's signature race events — the 5K Sprint, the 10K Super, and the half-marathon Beast — take runners through a variety of obstacles at courses all over the world, challenging both competitive athletes and newly-reformed couch potatoes alike. The team at Spartan Race Inc. is enthusiastic, inspired by the difference they see their races making in people's lives. But when that inspiration leads to what vice president of operational excellence and chief of staff Rob Neitzel calls a visit by the "idea fairy," Smartsheet helps the organization make smart decisions to keep exciting new initiatives from impeding strategic plans.

"When you go to a race, it's an incredible experience," Neitzel says. "It starts with the participants; they're truly the magic behind what we are. But in order to be an event-based company, of course, you have to have a team of professionals who can make sure that a profit-loss statement is on the upside, so that we can be healthy for years to come."

Solution

To plan and execute races in locations around the world, functional teams such as logistics, marketing, sponsorship, and merchandise depend on one another to coordinate details such as race planning and execution, marketing, and merchandise sales. But when Neitzel joined Spartan, he found that teams were challenged to effectively communicate across their focus areas. A key part of the problem was that different groups were using their own tools to organize and plan their part of the business, from email to spreadsheets to slide decks, with no consistent approach to ensure everyone was getting the information they needed.

Neitzel wanted to adopt the "baseball card" methodology he'd used as an Army Ranger, with each team or project summarized in a consistent

Customer:

Now, it's all at his fingertips. His business leads don't have to plan meetings with him to run through their projects; Neitzel can pull the information for himself and follow up with specific questions or concerns. And Neitzel says one of the biggest benefits is dealing with that "idea fairy" by helping to keep the constant flow of good new ideas from throwing existing plans off schedule.

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I was looking for software that would work with me and give me a customizable solution versus just a commercial off-the-shelf product. I reached out to the Smartsheet team; we did several whiteboard sessions and they came back to me with a variant of the baseball card. And every time I would make an ask or a modification they'd give me exactly what I was looking for. So because of these capabilities and the team's willingness to partner with me, I chose to go with Smartsheet.

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display showing goals and objectives, strategies, and tactics. On deployment, his teams carried and manually updated physical cards, but Neitzel knew Spartan needed a software solution that could be accessed online from any of the company's offices or race locations. His general manager of U.S. events thought Smartsheet could develop a digital baseball card that would bring Spartan's teams together.

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Today Neitzel uses Smartsheet to view status and issues for each of 14 core business units. The solution shows all the dependencies; for example, merchandise designs that the marketing team needs to create display ads, or sponsorship requirements that a site team needs to plan the size and number of banners that belong in the finish line area. The teams use dashboards for reporting to stakeholders, and social media scheduling is set up using Smartsheet's calendar functionality.

Less time in meetings, more time for planning and execution

Neitzel estimates that he saves about five hours a week – time that he used to spend digging through reports and email for project status. Now, it's all at his fingertips. His business leads don't have to plan meetings with him to run through their projects; Neitzel can pull the information for himself and follow up with specific questions or concerns. And Neitzel says one of the biggest benefits is dealing with that "idea fairy" by helping to keep the constant flow of good new ideas from throwing existing plans off schedule.

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Preventing disruption by the “Idea Fairy”

“Unfortunately we don’t have unlimited resources; we have to prioritize,” Neitzel says. “If I have visibility of my priorities and their outcomes, I can see the cost – not just in terms of dollars, but how it will delay the delivery of something else. So when our CEO, Joe De Sena, wants to bring in a new line of merchandise in mid-quarter, I can see what my vice president of merchandise has planned and tell Joe that interjecting new merchandise interrupts \$3.2 million of revenue. Formerly our tendency would be to say let’s just work harder and get it done. But with visibility through the baseball card tool, we can see the impact to our overall goals and make the right decision.”

Partnership in developing and perfecting the right solution

Neitzel is working with his Smartsheet account partner to build dashboards for the international teams that coordinate Spartan Race events around the world. A checklist system for event planning and execution is also in the works, with the potential to feed event data directly into the master system for easier post-event evaluation that can help improve future events. And as teams at Spartan adopt and take ownership of the solution – which is happening much more easily than Neitzel had hoped for – the possibilities continue to grow.

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