

EXPERIENCE EVENTS

CONCERTS & PERFORMANCES

TOURING PRESENTATIONS

SPECIAL EVENT
SNAKES & LADDERS

aubrum



**THERE IS
NO MAGIC**



**IN MAGIC,
IT'S ALL
IN THE
DETAILS**

— *Walt Disney*

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“There are some people who live in a dream world, and there are some who face reality; and then there are those who turn one into the other.”

— Senator D. H. Everett



» SPECIAL EVENTS

They come in all shapes and sizes. By definition, special events are, well, special – ‘atypical’ in spirit, out of the ordinary and certainly not associated with a recent marketing distortion, the ‘sales event’.

Sometimes ‘one-off’, sometimes annual, sometimes on a multi-year cycle (*like the La Biennale di Venezia or the Olympics*), true special events offer unique content, concentration on a theme or time sensitivity, as a significant portion of their appeal.

With so many possibilities it is difficult for a single document to be prescriptive. However, there is a common element to all events - people. Without an audience there is essentially no *raison d’être*, no arbiters and no reason to proceed. The audience must therefore be one’s focus. When an event meets the needs of its constituency, organizers are rewarded with patronage, typically in the form of increased spending, but also in trust, the willingness to return to the same or other events offered by that organizer. In that regard, events are transactional.

Organizers must view every facet of the event through the patrons’ eyes. That sounds simple enough but there are complexities, like, for example, the ‘curse of knowledge’. This is a common cognitive bias in which one assumes knowledge or understanding on the part of others, in this case patrons. Organizers work within constraint, sometimes economic, sometimes statutory, of which patrons are generally unaware. As a result, things that seem perfectly reasonable for the organizer can sometimes irritate patrons.

An example. Major League Baseball has a show called FanFest that travels as a component of the All-Star Game celebration. The show was created because

most people in the host city have no real chance of getting an All-Star Game ticket. The show allows everyone to participate in the festivities.

Exit surveys yielded one complaint about the show in every city, the cost of a hotdog, or more correctly the food concessions in general. Trouble was, Baseball has nothing to do with refreshments. Food is always a venue exclusive. However, patrons made no such distinction.

The best way to know your audience is simply to ask. Once a tool for only the largest organizers, surveys and polling via the web are now easily within reach of even the smallest events. It can be as simple as encouraging patrons to post comments on a site, or as sophisticated as a dedicated survey page created by a web developer.

Offer an incentive to those taking the time, either individually or as part of a draw. Not only is this next-level customer ‘engagement’ from the patron’s perspective, but the information is invaluable.





TAKE NO RESPONSIBILITY

Needless to say, the organizer is ultimately responsible for everything. However, there is a pervasive tendency amongst organizers to assign themselves some small tasks on event day; perhaps to lighten the load of others, perhaps to save money.

Whether the presentation is large or small, the 'build' is always packed with options and decisions, all of which require time and consideration. That is a given. Adding tasks to that burden, no matter how insignificant, increases the possibility of something important receiving short shrift.

Delegate everything. Keep your day clear. There will be no end to the demands on your time and people needing your input and approval. The final outcome is your vision, or at the very least, you are charged with realizing someone else's vision.

»» COMPETITIVE CONFLICTS

Once you have selected the quintessential date for your event, make sure it is not the quintessential date of someone else's event too.

Choose one or more dates tentatively, then check around. Don't forget to ask outside the immediate circle. Groupthink often produces feedback loops. There is no requirement to disclose intent, so ask broadly but without specificity.

Be similarly circumspect in choosing a location. The presentation may not be competing for an audience but, for a variety of reasons, it is extremely embarrassing to discover a competitor setting up in the room next door, or even down the hall.

From the venue's perspective, who is renting space and when is proprietary information. They are not likely to disclose the names of other clients, competitive or not, but they will be sensitive to obvious conflicts. Let them know about any other sensitivities. A happy client is a repeat client.

Date conflicts are particularly devastating for charities. While each has its base constituency, the pool of significant donors is finite. For these events, conflict might be a week or two on either side of the date. Some cities maintain a formal or informal charity event registry to avoid both conflicts and donor fatigue. Failing that, philanthropy has mavens, who are usually not difficult to find. A conversation with one or more of those in the know can stave-off misfortune.

Do disastrous conflicts really happen? Years ago, the game division of a huge software company (*that will remain nameless*) was planning a spectacular launch

for their new title. They selected a large film studio in Los Angeles, commensurate with the multi-million dollar extravaganza. Invitations went out to everyone of significance in computing and gaming.

Two days into the mammoth seven-day setup they became concerned that so few people had confirmed their attendance. A meeting was hastily called to discuss the situation. Turned out their launch had somehow been scheduled in the middle of COMDEX in Las Vegas, at the time, 'the' computing show. Even stranger, many of the game division's own staff were registered at COMDEX.

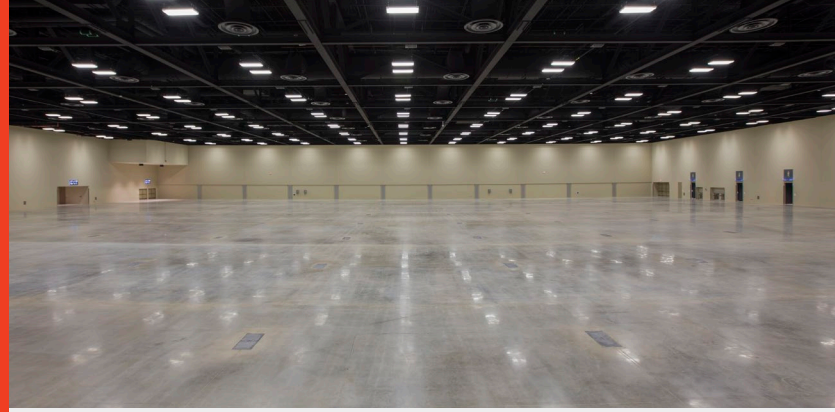
So embarrassing was the debacle, the parent company cancelled the show completely, writing off the investment, custom sets pieces and all. No word on how the organizers fared.

UNIONIZED ENVIRONMENTS

Many find unionized facilities frustrating. In such environments, tasks often take longer and require more people. That goes without saying. But it's important to remember that unions are a product of poor working conditions, and the show and event business has historically been one of the worst offenders.

Time pressure and adrenaline cause unusual thought processes. Unions force organizers to actually be organized – to have tasks, equipment and roles figured out and documented in advance. Anything less becomes punishingly expensive.

For you, the event is the culmination of weeks, maybe months of work. You have ruminated and consulted on every portion of the presentation. For the venue staff, there was an event just as vital to someone yesterday and another one tomorrow. They may not appear as enthusiastic as you think they should be but they are skilled practitioners and generally do a great job.



TALK WITH THOSE IN THE TRENCHES

Sales people are enthusiastic but they are rarely there during the event. If possible, talk directly to those delivering the service – the Event Coordinator, House Captain or Head Waiter. Even simple events have particular requirements. It is easy for sales to agree with any needs and dutifully commit them to the function sheet. But the people on the floor know what, under the circumstances, is possible and practical, and what tempts fate.

The sales department will likely do everything they can to discourage contact. You may even have to return during the setup of another function to meet those responsible for yours. But the extra effort usually pays dividends.





“the large print giveth and the small print taketh away”

‘Step Right Up’
Tom Waits

When you ‘contract’ event space, you are invariably presented with a ‘contract’ codifying who is responsible for what and when. These documents used to be a fairly standard boilerplate but, in recent years, facilities have been attempting to lock clients into the use of in-house suppliers, reaching well beyond reasonable bounds.

If you require a simple projector and screen, or you need equipment for several breakout rooms, the in-house might be just the ticket. However, if your presentation is complex, with cutting-edge technical support and tight sequencing, there is a good chance the in-house will be a very expensive disappointment. What the venue rarely mentions (*read never*) is that in-house sources kick-back commissions of between 40% - 60%. In most cases that translates to market rate plus commission.

To be clear, in-house suppliers have access to all the most sophisticated equipment. They are typically large entities and besides, it’s your nickel. However, few such suppliers attract the kind of ‘A’ team talent required to operate this equipment to best advantage. Many people play tennis but few play like Novak Djokovic and Ashleigh Barty.

The contract as initially presented is a starting point. Read it carefully. You might be surprised by how many areas the venue wants you to cede control for the venue’s benefit.

There might also be other creative charges such as a recording fee, video access fee, energy surcharge and the ubiquitous ‘landmark’ fee.



caveat emptor



TRANSPORTATION “IF IT’S ON TIME... IT’S A FLUKE”

(ACTUAL FLUKE TRANSPORTATION GROUP SLOGAN)

Order something on Amazon and it often arrives within a few hours. That is not the case for almost everything else. In fact, transportation is very much an Achilles’ Heel for shows and events. If you hire a contractor to mount your event, transportation is their problem. If you are doing some or all of the components in-house, the problem becomes yours.

Despite all the slogans, shipping anything can be wildly unpredictable. There are a lot of variables involved. For most receiving goods, knowing the day something is supposed to arrive is good enough – and if not then, the next day. In the event business, timing is critical. Not only is the shipment required on a specific day, it is also required at a specific time.

Without getting into the minutia of freight forwarding, there are two basic categories; common carrier and contract hauling. With the former, your goods share a truck with others, with the latter, the truck is consigned to your goods alone.



Contract hauling is obviously better but it is definitely not without issues. On a cross country tour for an automobile manufacturer, the freight company, partially owned by the client, managed to lose two of the seven trailers somewhere between Calgary and Edmonton, cities less than three hours apart.

We can offer no **magic bullet**, just a **cautionary note**.

DO NOT LET GREAT BE THE ENEMY OF GOOD

From an audience perspective, a good show that works is always better than a daring show that fails. Resist the temptation to make great the enemy of good. The audience can see only what is there, not what might have been. Reward those expectations with innovation and craft, not disappointment.

The opening ceremony at the Salt Lake Olympics culminated with an Indigenous archer shooting a flaming arrow into a cauldron several hundred feet up and away, dramatically igniting the Olympic flame. A poignant and symbolic moment. Not including a secondary ignition method for the iconic component, beamed live around the world, would have been foolhardy.

This is in no way to suggest being boring, safe and ordinary. Quite the contrary. Thrilling things are memorable. Mundane things, not so much. However, there is considerable difference between acceptable risk and pushing the envelope, particularly when the show is a 'one-off'.

Shoot for the stars, certainly. That is the very essence of show business. But always pack a parachute for the well-being of your audience.

POWER OF LISTS

The power of detailed list-making is unassailable. Presentations and events are comprised of hundreds, sometimes thousands of eclectic details. Lists organize, categorize and prioritize the often discordant requirements into actionable tasks, that can be reviewed at a glance. In the old days lists required many notebook pages and tedious re-writes. Now spreadsheets and list apps make list-keeping and cross-referencing a breeze. Add the power of habit and just about anything is possible.

SECRET WEAPONS

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. This seems obvious, even trite, but it is shocking how little rehearsal actually happens. Executives are busy and time is expensive. All of that is true. But the stakes at a presentation are particularly high.

No product ever gets to the shelves without a few prototypes. How can one reasonably expect 20 or more presenters, performers and technicians to mesh flawlessly without running through the program **several** times? They may well be gifted craftspeople but they are not wizards.

The difference between amazing and acceptable almost always comes down to rehearsal.

Audience perception is paramount to success and nothing softens an environment more cost-effectively than plants. In most cases greenery is a better choice than flowering species. Ferns and trees of all sizes can be rented, providing a lush, natural counterpoint without stealing attention.

People also find daylight quite soothing. However, if your event or presentation requires audience focus, avoid locations with natural light. Nothing flattens the field of vision more definitely than daylight, and it is very difficult to fight the unintentionally reductive effects of the sun.

Maintaining a very detailed contact sheet can be a lifesaver. There is always someone who forgot, something that went astray or unforeseen circumstances that requires urgent action, and your time window is absolute.

Setups are often after hours, so the sheet should have as much information as possible; work and mobile numbers, addresses and second in charge (2-IC), should the prime contact be unavailable. Include everyone involved in the event, no matter how modest their participation.

There are few more versatile tools in the event 'bag of tricks' than gaffer tape. It is miraculous. We are talking about dead flat gaffer tape and not low luster duct tape. The latter has some of the properties but little of the finesse. Once you use real gaffer tape, anything else is inferior.

Gaffer tape tears clean in both directions and once applied, can be virtually invisible. It comes in a variety of blend-in or stand-out colours, and is available at most event supply houses – but not 'big box' stores.



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